

OLDER LEARNERS - LEARNING LATER IN LIFE

Older people are a large and growing part of the EU's population and this is changing our societies in important and fundamental ways. Older persons wish to be active participants in their workplaces and communities, but in many cases opportunities and facilities are not available or accessible.

Learning provides many of these opportunities, and research has shown the benefits:

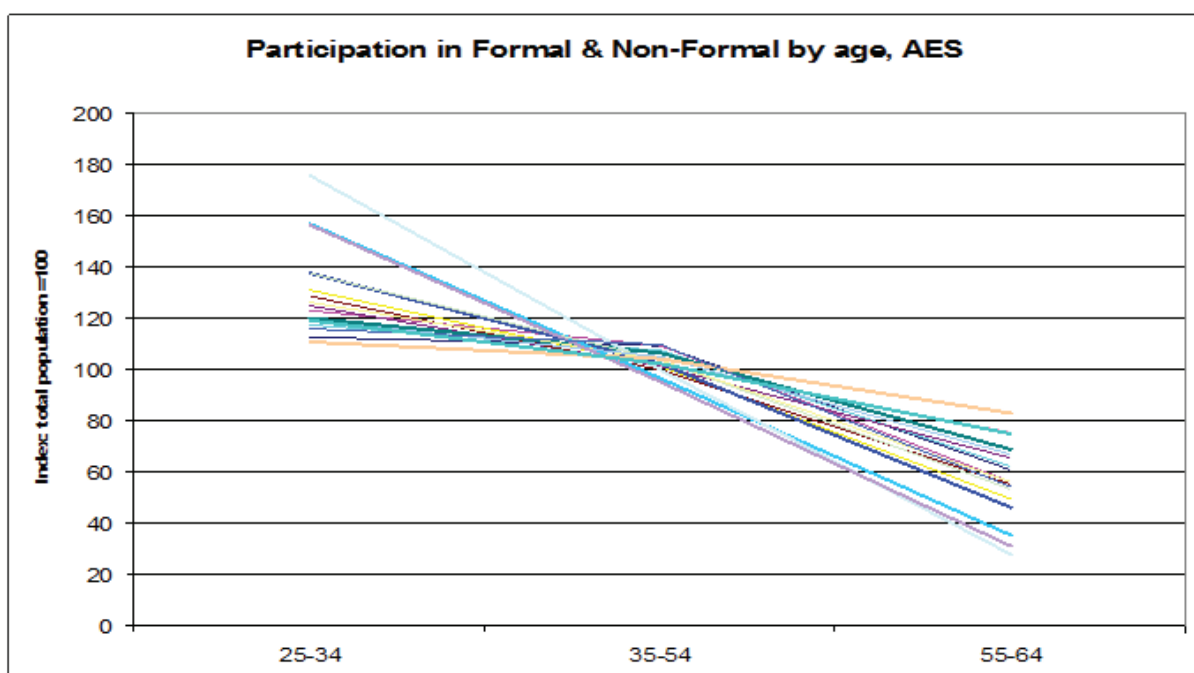
To put it simply, does learning lead to social inclusion? This question can be answered in the affirmative. Those who continue to attend further education in older age, expand their social relations and assess better their state of health, and certainly independent of gender. Education can thus lead to greater social integration. Older people who attend further education courses commit themselves voluntarily, they have more confidence in political institutions, take part in campaigns, petitions and political discussion. Another influence stemming from educational participation is the ownership of new media queried through computers and the Internet. People who take part in organised educational processes tend to have access to the new information technologies.

(Kolland, Ahmadi, Hauenschild, Vienna, 2009)

It is therefore necessary to provide high quality learning opportunities for all older people, which, in turn, will need the necessary framework of policies, funding, structures and access.

I. Participation in learning

Participation in adult learning declines with age:



As both the Adult Education Survey (AES) and the Labour Force Survey take only people up to 64 into consideration, we don't have European data on the participation of older people, but we can assume that participation rates are declining even more the older people get.

The British Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (Schuller, Watson, 2009) found the following data for the UK, which we can use as an example:

Weighted participation ratios across the four life stages.

	18 – 24	25 – 49	50 – 74	75 +
Formal learning	3.250	225	27	5.5
Informal learning	325	90	27	5.5

Source: IFLL

The expenditure on formal and informal learning mirrors the participation:

Expenditure on formal and informal learning across the four life stages, 2008.

	18 – 24	25 – 49	50 – 74	75 +
Total expenditure (£ millions)	£ 47.141	£ 6.057	£ 1.397	£ 285
Percentage of total expenditure	86 %	11 %	2.5 %	0.5 %

It is obvious that more efforts, support, knowledge, outreach and funding are needed so that more older people can and will participate in learning.

II. International policy frameworks

The value of lifelong learning for older people has been identified in research and international policy frameworks:

UN Principles for older people

- Lifelong learning is noted in the points under the UN Principles for Older People:
- **Independence:** Older persons should have access to appropriate educational and training programmes.
- **Participation:** Older persons should remain integrated in society, participate actively in the formulation and implementation of policies that directly affect their well-being and share their knowledge and skills with younger generations.
- **Self-fulfillment:** Older persons should be able to pursue opportunities for the full development of their potential. Older persons should have access to the educational, cultural, spiritual and recreational resources of society.

WHO (2002) Active Ageing: a Policy Framework

The WHO Policy Framework for Active Ageing summarises the current evidence which constitutes the determinants of active ageing, many of which acknowledge the role of lifelong learning. Education and lifelong learning are seen as key factors for ensuring health, participation and security in later life. To make this possible, an age-friendly policy is regarded as essential.

UN Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing

Lifelong learning is noted in the UN policy direction 'older persons and development', which underlines the need to provide opportunities, programmes and support to encourage older persons to participate or continue to participate in cultural, economic, political, social life and lifelong learning. Education is seen as crucial basis for an active and fulfilling life.

European Agenda on Adult Learning:

Also the European Agenda on Adult Learning recommends: make well-developed learning provision for seniors, in order to promote active, autonomous, and healthy ageing, and which uses their knowledge, experience, social and cultural capital for the benefit of society as a whole;

One of the priorities for the period 2012 until 2014 is the enhancement of learning opportunities for older adults in the context of active ageing, including volunteering and the promotion of innovative forms of intergenerational learning and initiatives to exploit the knowledge, skills and competences of older people for the benefit of society as a whole.

2012 - European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations

The European Year is intended to raise awareness of the contribution that older people make to society. It seeks to encourage policymakers and relevant stakeholders at all levels to take action with the aim of creating better opportunities for active ageing and strengthening solidarity between generations.

The European Year 2012 seeks to promote active ageing in three areas: Employment, Participation in society, independent living

III. Recommendations

EAEA identifies several key areas that must be addressed in order to create an effective and efficient adult education service for older people.

a. Securing access to high quality learning

Unfortunately, older people who participate in learning are still in the minority:

The younger the person, the higher the school-leaving qualifications, the higher the income and the larger the place of residence, the greater the likelihood of participation in adult education will be. People tend to attend educational events when they are working. Interest wanes after retirement. This is especially true for men.

In addition to the socio-structural element, there is also a perceptible social dimension. Older adults with a social network outside the home, which is characterised by frequent personal contacts, attend courses / programmes significantly more frequently.

Participation in adult education is conditioned not only by socio-demographic and social considerations, but also by certain personality traits. If learning processes are perceived as an inner satisfaction or emotional experience and not as an effort, then the educational offers are taken up.

Those who are learning in old age (in an organised manner) have also taken part in learning processes during their working life. As such, learning in older age should be seen as a continuous process. The important thing here is that such learning is not taken up recently. If people attend vocational and/or general adult education and training regularly in their forties and fifties, then they will continue to do so in older age. (Kolland, Ahmadi, Hauenschild, Vienna 2009)

We therefore need to make sure that learning does not remain the privilege of a relatively small, middle-class, well-educated minority – learning in all its forms should become part of everyone's retirement.

Adult education providers should make sure to offer appropriate learning opportunities and that information, guidance and counseling services for older learners are provided. But it will be also up to companies to provide and encourage learning for everyone across the ages. It will be up to governments to make sure that older people from a disadvantaged background will have the possibility to participate (e.g. by supporting outreach activities, no or very low course fees, funding). It should be ensured that older people have access to financial and economic learning resources.

Clear, concise and understandable information about learning among older persons should be given, who need to be aware that these offers are available in the first place. EAEA highlights the importance of guidance as a continuous process that enables older learners to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational and training decisions and to manage their life paths in learning. Finally, campaigns that underline the social and fun dimension of learning for older adults can help raise awareness and participation.

b. Making the lifelong learning needs of older learners a priority for providers

It is necessary to look at the barriers to learning opportunities for older learners and make sure that they are accessible in terms of venue, cost, timing and duration as well as relevant to their day-to-day living. Barriers vary when looking at different generations regarding learners' educational level and the connection to employment. Also, out-dated perceptions such as 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks' mean additional, psychological barriers.

EAEA therefore recommends investing in the competences of trainers working with older adults and providing clear, concise and understandable information for older persons. Outreach work and partnerships (e.g. with seniors' organisations) is especially important. In this regard, EAEA calls for bottom up processes and grassroots advocacy that includes the (potential) learners themselves. At all levels, including the European level, there is a need for structures to facilitate learners' voices and listen to them.

c. Intergenerational learning

Intergenerational learning can contribute enormously to social cohesion by promoting understanding and cooperation between different generations. Additionally, the benefits to all the participants in intergenerational projects, young and older, tend to be huge: from more confidence to new friendship and practical skills and knowledge. We therefore need to encourage best practice identification and exchange and to create models for adaptation, awareness raising campaigns for the benefits of intergenerational learning, to create space for models for intergenerational learning within the curricula, and finally funding and legal frameworks to facilitate the process.

d. Older workers

Traditionally, learning in companies has been reserved for younger and better educated staff. EAEA promotes a change of mindset about working, learning and ageing by enhancing flexibility and diversity in learning and working in later life. More innovative work practices and learning measures for older workers are required, by bringing forward the voice and initiative of older workers themselves.

Workplace learning opportunities for older workers, coupled with strong learning support (such as learning and studying skills, IT skills, etc.), leads to a feeling of being valued, appreciated and needed, and contributes to their employability.

Social partners should be involved in improving the life of older workers. It is necessary to plan learning and employment strategies for older workers in an integrated manner. For example skills development is made possible through providing opportunities for lifelong learning, which should be made accessible up until retirement. Employers should offer improved flexibility and systematic organization and provision of training (such as sabbaticals), which also has positive organizational effects (on staff retention, conflict resolution, management, etc.). These positive outcomes can also be seen through intergenerational competences transfers in the company, such as mentoring schemes for sharing of skills, competences and know-how between the generations. Finally, recognizing and documenting older workers' core competences, makes employers and social partners aware of the existing valuable skills base.

e. Health benefits

Healthy ageing is not just about prolonging life, but rather ensuring that we age in good health for as long as possible. Many of the illnesses in later life are preventable, and research shows that there exists a significant link between education and health. Learning is a major means in maintaining mental activity, enabling older people to cope better with daily life, to stay independent and to participate in society. EAEA encourages the development of proactive health policies focusing on adult learning and health promotion, which is universal, equal and targeted.

Very old learners and mental health

As we live longer mental illnesses, such as Alzheimer's disease and therefore dementia are widely acknowledged to be one of the most pressing problems facing health and social care systems. Dementia affects people in all countries and the number is expected to double by 2030 (65.7 million) and more than triple by 2050 (115.4 million)¹. Therefore one of the greatest challenges of our time is how society cares for persons with dementia, how they can and want to keep their independence and stay active. There are already initiatives and institutions (such as Hogewey in the Netherlands and Aigburth Care Homes in Leicester UK) dealing with that challenge, which have developed innovative, humane ways of caring for people with dementia. Learning at an advanced age, is always a central concept of these institutions and initiatives, and learners report positive emotional or mental health benefits. It is speculated that mentally stimulating activities have positive and lasting impact on cognition and may even prevent or delay dementia and Alzheimer's disease (Snowden, 2001 in Simone and Scullin, 2006)². Because of that EAEA underlines the positive impact of adult learning to the mental health of very old learners. It is essential to raise awareness of the benefits of learning in care settings and encourage providers and various stakeholders to extend and enhance learning opportunities for older people in care settings.

f. Digital bridge

Participating in society in Europe increasingly depends on digital access – from eforms and e-governments to online shopping and electronic communication, access to computers and the internet become more and more important. EAEA believes that digitalization for senior learners should be a key part of all active aging policies. ICT strategies and policies should proactively target older people. IT equipment, curricula and training methods have to be tailored to the needs of and be in line with the life interests of the senior learners. Many good practice examples in intergenerational learning have involved ICT skills and a transfer of these innovations is very desirable.

1 World Health Organization: http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2012/dementia_20120411/en/index.html
2 Simone, P. and Scullin, M. (2003) "Cognitive Benefits of Participation in Lifelong Learning Institutes"

g. Supporting and Financing learning

Providing learning opportunities for older people goes to the heart of the lifelong learning concept – EAEA believes that it's really never too late to learn. Nevertheless, many people across Europe still believe that they don't need to learn any more from a certain age onwards. This belief of course is often linked to an understanding of learning that is formal, goes back to negative school experiences and is often due to the fact that people haven't learned 'consciously' in a long time.

In recent years and especially in times of crisis, some governments and institutions have looked at adult learning from a strictly employability-oriented perspective: investing in learning should help people either acquire or keep their jobs. This is certainly an important aspect (and is definitely related to EAEA's recommendations for older workers – they should have the same chance to secure their employability as younger people), but active aging challenges this. EAEA, together with member organisations, has worked on the wider benefits of adult education and we believe these are especially crucial for older people. Considering that demographic change will have an enormous impact over the next decades, Europe needs to prepare for the consequences. Investing in the learning of all people across the lifelong learning range and especially of older people, going beyond the concept of employability, will be crucial for the future of Europe's people.

Adult Education Providers

- As mentioned above, adult education providers should offer information, guidance and counseling services on non-formal and informal learning to help older people better understand the skills they have gained through their life-experience and to better recognize how these skills can be used.
- Develop outreach activities and appropriate opportunities for older people without recent learning experiences. Promoting 'learning to learn' competences can be helpful, too.
- Research found that older learners learn differently from other age groups. Certain courses are considered more suitable to undertake with peers. For other courses an intergenerational setting may be more appropriate³. EAEA suggests that adult education providers should consider a mixture of targeted learning groups, both heterogeneous and homogenous groups.
- Enhancing informal adult learning for older people in care settings calls for learning providers, care homes, health institutions and policymakers to work together, in order to improve, adapt and widen these opportunities.
- EAEA calls for grassroots processes: when designing and offering learning opportunities, there is a need to facilitate learners' voices and listen to them. It is about working and learning with older people rather than for them. The learners are experts about their needs.
- EAEA recommends adult education providers to invest in the competences and skills of trainers working with older adults as well as to raise the awareness and positive attitude among adult educators working with older learners.

National governments

- National governments need to implement national strategies for the elderly with a strong focus on adult learning.
- National awareness campaigns for the benefits of learning can give a boost to active aging through adult learning.
- Partnerships with care homes, learning providers and health institutions should make sure that ideal learning settings for very old learners and persons in care settings are created and available.

- It is known that policy development is likely to be more effective if the process involves consultation and involvement of older people, who are the experts on their own lives and needs.
- Government should work with social partners and civil society to deliver effective services for older people.
- Appropriate funding and structural support are necessary to extend the participation of older people in learning, especially those with lower economic and educational levels.
- More information about the participation of older people in learning is needed, therefore more data beyond the age of 64 should be collected. The member states should agree to extending the relevant EUROSTAT surveys to at least 70.

Companies

- Many companies are not aware of the potential learning brings to their older employees and few provide special supports aimed at workers aged over 45. They should see themselves as learning organization and invest in learning for everyone. Learning is not something that only happens at a younger age, but should be part of everyday (working-) life at any age. This can be done through training measures, coaching and guidance for older staff or in the form of sabbaticals.
- Knowledge management initiatives within the companies can leverage older staff's particular strengths such as their experience. Older employees might act as mentors to younger staff and also teach at the company's corporate university to pass on knowledge built up through years of experience.

Social Partners

- Social partners need to understand the possibilities of non-formal learning and which opportunities and benefits are brought along.
- Partnerships and enhanced cooperation with adult education providers can ensure conditions and services relevant to the needs of older people.
- Learning models in which the social partners play active roles (e.g. shop stewards as learning counselors) have proven to be very successful and need to be extended and transferred. In these models, a particular focus should be put on older workers.

EU

- In the Lifelong Learning Programme, the Grundtvig programme focuses on adult learning. There is also a specific mobility action on 'senior volunteering' that deserves promotion and more support. The next programme should also provide for an emphasis on older learners.
- Promote adult learning provision for older people in Europe, but especially in countries that do not have a tradition of non-formal learning participation of older people, through campaigns, grants, funding, etc.
- Monitor the European Agenda: the renewed European agenda has set priorities for the participation of older learners. In order to achieve progress, we propose setting concrete objectives and monitoring the developments closely.
- We encourage other institutions on the European level – the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – to consider and promote active aging strategies and campaigns with a special emphasis on adult learning across Europe.