



Marta Wrońska*

SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM SUPPORT FOR UNIVERSITIES OF THE THIRD AGE (ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE PODKARPACKIE PROVINCE)

INTRODUCTION

In Poland, the process of changing the demographic structure associated with the growing share of older people in the population has been observed for many years. The prolonged life expectancy means that in the next twenty years there will be a rapid process of aging of the population. The aging rate of the population is illustrated by the median age (a parameter defining the age limit that half of the population has already crossed and the other half has not yet reached), which in 2012 was 38.7 in the total population of Poland, and in 2035 according to the forecast by the Central Statistical Office (GUS), may amount to 47.9 years (over 25 years an increase of 26%). Along with the changing structure of the Polish population, the structure of the people at the post-working age will also change. By 2035, compared to 2010, the share of people in age ranges 60/65-74, 75-79, 80-84, 85-89, 90+ will increase, and the highest dynamics of growth will be observed among people in 90+ (about 2.5-fold increase), 85-89 (a 2-fold increase). The number of people aged 75+ will amount to approx. 4.5 million in 2035 (in 2010 this number was 2.4 million) (after Journal of Laws 2014, item 52). The changing demographic situation puts Poland ahead of the challenge of planning and shaping policies for active and healthy aging. It is very important to promote new solutions to motivate older people to learn to stay active. It is also important to increase the social involvement of older people and intergenerational cooperation. The issue of educational activation of the elderly, as an important element of social activity, has been incorporated into governmental documents and programs that form the basis of a senior policy in our country. Recently, there have been several important proposals, for example the *Governmental Program for Social Activity of the Elderly for 2014-2020* assuming the practical inclusion of the sector of non-governmental organizations in activities aimed at the involvement of seniors; *Multi-annual Senior+ Program for 2015-2020*, edition in

* University of Rzeszów.





2018, the strategic objective of which is to increase active participation of seniors in social life by expanding the infrastructure of support centres in the local environment and increasing the number of places in *Senior+* facilities; *The 75+ Care program* for 2018 enabling the support of municipalities in the implementation of their own tasks or the program of the Minister of Science and Higher Education *Support for Universities of the Third Age* from November 2016. The main task of the latter of these programs was to disseminate science and research and their applications among students of universities of the third age.

THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM SUPPORT FOR UNIVERSITIES OF THE THIRD AGE

The ministerial program is an undertaking that takes into account areas and directions of support enabling improvement of the quality and standard of living of older people for dignified aging through social activity. Thanks to the decision of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 12 October 2016 on the establishment of a program called *Support for Universities of the Third Age*, a competition for financing the projects under it was announced. Clear conditions for joining the competition have been set out. Scientific institutions and entities acting for science could apply for the funding. Moreover, in order to implement the project under the program, the beneficiary was obliged to cooperate with at least five universities of the third age (U3A) or entities intending to start such activities operating in one province and to sign letters of intent with them that will be attached to the application. In the assessment of applications, the quality of the proposed concept was important, including: cohesion, innovation, proposed methodology, organization of classes, diversification of the proposed activities; experience of the entity applying for the grant of funds; expected effects of the project implementation and the social impact of the project, taking into account the importance of the project implementation for the local community; the appropriateness of the planned costs of the project in relation to the scope of undertaken activities (justification, own involvement of the entity applying for the grant of funds), as well as the feasibility of the project, i.e. the availability of organizational and infrastructural resources.

PROJECT PASSION, PROFESSIONALISM AND CREATIVITY – THE DEVELOPMENT PATH OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

Feeling responsible for the quality of education of older people, we wrote the project *Passion professionalism, creativity – the development path of the University of the Third Age*, which gained acceptance of the competition commission and received funding





from the Ministry. The authors of the project were prof. of UR dr hab. Ryszard Pęczkowski (Dean of the Faculty), prof. of UR dr hab. Marta Wrońska (Head of the Department of Media Pedagogy) and Dr Marek Hallada (assistant at the Department of Media Pedagogy). We invited the following entities to implement the project: U3A (University of the Third Age) at the University of Rzeszów, the Jasło Association of the University of the Third Age, U3A of the Diocese of Rzeszów, Krosno University of the Third Age, Mielec University of the Third Age and Łańcut University of the Third Age. The beneficiary of the project was the Faculty of Pedagogy. It is a scientific and didactic unit, which is an integral part of the University of Rzeszów. The Faculty's mission is naturally related to the mission of the entire University, which emphasizes the special importance of research development and its application for the benefit of the whole community and education at a high level.

The three main objectives of the project include: dissemination of science and research in the field of cultural and artistic education; supporting and developing the potential and inventiveness of the listeners of the University of the Third Age; shaping the multifaceted activity (educational, social and cultural) of older people by raising the competences necessary to live in the modern world as an important element to counteract the social exclusion of older people. Further goals, i.e. the development of intergenerational solidarity and environmental integration, were implemented to our satisfaction to a sufficient degree, as evidenced by the individual reports submitted by individual coordinators from six universities at the end of the project, which took place on 12 December 2017.

Our project included the following forms of activity: a series of lectures answering the needs of older people and a series of workshops on building social ties (theatre and literary workshops, workshops *Contemporary digital photography. Creative photography*, workshops *Local traditions in art, handicraft and music*). The aim of the workshops was to shape and improve self-esteem, usefulness for others, broadening social contacts, the ability to pursue their passions and a sense of well-used time. Another form of activity was a series of seminars with the participation of students – members of the Student Science Club “Matrix” operating at the Department of Media Pedagogy at the Faculty of Pedagogy. Seminars were devoted to e-exclusion of older people. The topics of the seminars included such areas as: the functioning of adolescents and seniors in the digital environment; the phenomenon of overproduction of information in the media space – dilemmas of a young user and a senior; mobile applications and their use in everyday functioning of seniors; security and anonymity in the network, technological anonymity. Our students actively participated in the workshops. The aim of the seminars was to build intergenerational social ties and provide knowledge about digital media, prepare seniors for constructive use of the media, as well as to shape and improve the skills of conscious, reflective and critical receipt of the media coverage. During the seminars, we made our students aware that seniors are an invaluable value for younger generations. Their life ideals, moral principles, personal dignity, cultivating of the traditions, the memory of gen-





erations, history, concern for consistent intergenerational relations despite “otherness” are priceless and cannot be overlooked or be indifferent to these facts.

SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM – OWN RESEARCH

The main objective of the research was to get from the seniors – participants in the project information on how they perceived the ministerial program of *Support for Universities of the Third Age*. An author’s original tool was designed for the needs of the research. The research used a targeted selection of the sample.* The targeted sample used in the research is not statistically representative, but it can be treated as representative of our project *Passion, professionalism, creativity – the way of development of the University of the Third Age*. Individual interviews were also conducted with six coordinators of individual entities, which we invited to our project. The research was carried out from 12 November to 12 December 2017.

The undertaken research has yielded answers to the following fundamental questions:

- What forms of activity do seniors prefer?
- What were the reasons (motives) of participation by seniors in the activities proposed under the project?
- How do seniors assess project implementation in terms of content and organization?

The research used a questionnaire for seniors – participants in the project, which contained closed, semi-open and multiple-choice questions. The questionnaire was filled out by 456 respondents. 449 correctly filled sheets were used for proper tests. The research was anonymous.

FORMS OF ACTIVITY OF SENIORS

Today’s seniors want to remain as active as possible for the longest time, fully enjoying the charms of life. The question arises: can activity be considered a panacea for all the shortcomings of old age? Probably not, but the source of premature aging may be physical and mental passivity, as well as lack of interest and sense of life. Activity is a prerequisite for successful aging. Active aging allows us to use the potential that people in late adulthood have. From an individual’s perspective, aging should be seen not as a disease, but as a natural biological process that goes on in time. It cannot be eliminated, but it can be slowed down and mitigated, thus extending the period

* Stefan Nowak wrote in the book *Metodologia badań socjologicznych*: “Target selection is a conscious selection of objects for the sample being tested because they meet a certain type of criteria” (2007, p. 55).



of active, self-reliant and independent living. Answers of seniors (participants in our project) regarding the forms of activity have been grouped into the following areas: 1. Formal activities: a) activity in organizations and associations; b) participation in classes offered by the University of the Third Age; c) work for the benefit of the local community; d) voluntary service; e) other; 2. Informal activities: a) contact with the family; b) contact with neighbors; c) contact with friends; d) other; 3. Activities in solitude: a) watching television; b) reading; c) computer work; d) own hobby; e) other.

Our respondents prefer the following formal activities (Table 1).

Table 1. Formal activities of seniors

| Formal activities | N | % |
|--|-----|--------------|
| Participation in classes offered by the University of the Third Age | 320 | 71.27 |
| Activity in organizations and associations | 122 | 27.17 |
| Work for the benefit of local environment | 89 | 19.82 |
| Voluntary service | 45 | 10.02 |
| Other | – | – |

Source: own study.

The obtained data clearly indicates the participation of seniors in the activities proposed by the University of the Third Age. It is the result of attractive classes and well-selected staff, which is extremely important in the case of older listeners who have a large amount of knowledge and experience. The lecturers must be prepared in a substantive manner with perfectly developed methodology. Our seniors also undertake activities in various organizations and associations, as well as work for the local community, and voluntary services (57.01%), which should be assessed positively. They are aware that their knowledge and skills are necessary and may be useful for others. In addition, such activity is not only a chance to stay in touch with people and enrich their experiences, it is a way of life that allows them to feel useful. Informal activities, which are undertaken by seniors have been presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Informal activities of seniors.

| Informal activities of seniors | N | % |
|----------------------------------|-----|-------|
| Contact with family | 350 | 77.95 |
| Contact with friends | 157 | 34.97 |
| Contact with neighbours | 98 | 21.83 |
| Contact with other people | 26 | 5.80 |
| Watching television | 413 | 91.98 |
| Reading | 216 | 48.10 |
| Own hobby | 153 | 34.08 |

| | | |
|----------------------|----|-------|
| Computer work | 78 | 17.37 |
| Other | – | – |

Source: own study.

From the data contained in Tab. 2 it is evident that non-formal activities undertaken by seniors are primarily contact with the family, as indicated by 77.95% of seniors, and television watching – 91.98%. Such results were to be expected. People entering the seniors' age need huge family support. The end of professional activity and retirement is a change in the current lifestyle and daily schedule, moreover, worse well-being or health problems, these are just some of the challenges that seniors face. Therefore, the need to be with their loved ones. In turn, television significantly changed the lifestyle of older people. Today, almost everyone has a cable TV at home with dozens of programs, and even solutions for recording favorite programs. As a result, seniors like to spend time in front of the TV. Unfortunately, spending many hours in front of a television set means stopping physical activity, which increases the risk of a heart attack or stroke. Therefore, it is good that seniors pursue their own hobby (34.08%). It gives them the chance to find inner peace, a sense of fulfillment, and releases positive energy and joy.

REASONS (MOTIVES) FOR PARTICIPATION IN CLASSES CARRIED OUT AS PART OF THE PROJECT AND ITS EVALUATION BY SENIORS

The concept that co-occurs with activity is activation, or the process undertaken to achieve specific goals. The project, written by us and approved by the Ministry, *Passion, professionalism and creativity – the development path of the University of the Third Age* created appropriate conditions for the activity of seniors and indicated the possibilities for their activity. When asking the respondents for the reasons (motives) of participating in the activities proposed in the project, a few pieces of important information were obtained, which were grouped in the following categories (Table 3).

Table 3. Reasons (motives) of participation by seniors in the activities carried out under the project

| Reasons (motives) | N | % |
|--|-----|-------|
| Possibility of maintaining the intellectual efficiency | 397 | 88.42 |
| The prospect of realizing own passions and interests | 322 | 71.72 |
| Attractive spending of free time | 294 | 65.48 |
| Being in a group of people of similar age, active contact with other class participants | 245 | 54.55 |
| Acquiring new knowledge and skills | 197 | 43.88 |

Source: own study.



The most important reason (motive) indicated by seniors was the possibility to maintain intellectual efficiency – 88.42%. Every age has its own limitations, both physical and mental. In an older age, mental condition is very important. Mental functioning of a human has an indisputable impact on the quality of life. With age, the rate of information processing in the nervous system is decreasing, there are problems with concentration and speed of reaction, often memory fails. That is why intellectual efficiency is so important. Seniors are aware that by consistently taking care of the smooth functioning of the brain one can minimize, delay or stop many problems related to the aging of the mind.

Respondents were also asked about their opinions about the activities carried out as part of the project. The question was open, respondents were free to comment on the activities in which they participated. Opinions were obtained from 356 people, which is 79.29% of respondents. The seniors stressed that the classes met their expectations, which correlates with the motives of participation in the classes mentioned in the survey. It is worth quoting some of the following statements: “Participating in the creative photography classes I got to know a different side of photography. So far, I have photographed the reality I have found, trying to show it as faithfully and beautifully as possible. Thanks to the classes I saw that you can create a new, not always real reality. This can be achieved by implementing ideas: staging of photo sets, modifications and processing of images. The only limit is the imagination” (Paweł N.); “Participation in creative photography workshop has enriched my knowledge in this field. It is very important who runs the workshop and how. Zdzisław is amazing in this matter. He was able to interest an ordinary slovenly person with photography and see the beauty of the world around him. If I do not become a photography master, at least I spend my precious time wonderfully” (Wanda W.); “Theatre workshops are run professionally. The host made us realize that acting can be experienced at any age, but physical and intellectual fitness is important, hence, one should take care of their condition [...]. During the workshop I got to know other secrets of the actor’s profession – there are emotions and movement to play, apart from the word and the outfit, even when the actor does not say a single word on the stage. [...] however, I am not discouraged and laboriously training” (Janina B.); “Meetings at theatre workshops give me a lot of satisfaction and content. They are conducted in an interesting and professional way. The instructor is a great personality, he shares with us his talent and artistic soul. By participating in the workshop, I also met new friends and I could learn a lot from them too. These classes also give me the opportunity to practice memory, empathy and finally learn about myself from a completely different angle. They bring me into a good mood, improve my mood. It was a good choice to participate in this project” (Teresa T.).

Individual interviews with six coordinators of individual entities were also conducted. We received highly positive reviews about the project from the senior coordinators in the ministerial program. Here are some of them: “[...] the project was valuable, necessary and timely. [...] it liberated new areas of educational activity in



the participants, renewed and expanded their knowledge [...]. It built new social ties with the 21st century generation, which moves freely in the media space. It inspired older people to be more socially active" (Waleria Ć.); "The project of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education appears as a modest, first shy step confirming the interest of the central state authorities in the problems of the unselfish and heroic everyday struggle of the University of the Third Age with a difficult and challenging reality" (Stanisław R.); "Interpersonal relationships have been established, which have not only an intellectual but, above all, emotional dimension, building the seeds of friendship. It seems that this is a very important added value of this program, perhaps even unintentional" (Marek D.); "The U3A *Support Program* brought considerable benefits, including financial ones, although the regulations of the program did not allow for flexible financial management, which caused many difficulties in the implementation of the project. An unquestionable overall success is the integration of the Podkarpackie U3A community and the feeling of pride in each other's achievements" (Danuta K.).

The obtained results have no value of representativeness; however, they are important because they show that the project was important and needed for the local community whose representatives are seniors. This group particularly needs their old age to be calm, free of worry and they need an appropriate, honorable place in society. They deserve it after the work of their whole life. The conducted research has shown that our project has influenced the qualitative growth, resulting from the benefits of mutual cooperation, mutual learning and interaction between all project participants.

CONCLUSION

The interactive formula of the whole project has contributed to meeting the various needs of seniors, such as: broadening and updating the knowledge and diverse skills, the ability to perform socially useful activities, fill free time, maintaining social ties, mental and physical stimulation. The various activities implemented in the project for including the elderly in the group of learners have implemented the idea of lifelong learning, especially in those areas that best meet the educational needs of a group of older citizens. Taking up the educational activity by older people enabled them not only to broaden their knowledge, acquire new and update their existing skills, but also played an important role in creating social ties and was thus a factor supporting social activity. The overarching task of the project was to focus on the positive aspects of life – reflected in the emotional state of mind and an optimistic sense of well-being, which generates attitudes of conscious and deliberate choices conducive to a positive model of aging. As a result of the project, we have included seniors in the university's scientific life; we have consolidated intergenerational relations (seniors – students – academic research workers); we have raised the level of se-



niors' activity in selected areas of social life (theatre, photography, regional tradition, music, literature, etc.); we also raised the level of seniors' awareness of the benefits and threats of functioning in the contemporary media space; we have tightened co-operation between Universities of the Third Age operating in the Podkarpackie Province and we have promoted a number of activities for the elderly. These are a few key conclusions of the social impact of the government program, and the most visible social effect is the satisfaction of seniors themselves. The implementation of our project showed that people aged 70 and 80 (such involved in our project and research) are not at all old, which means that, an American engineer, Ford Motor Company founder, Henry Ford, was right formulating such an important idea: "It does not matter how old you are, the one who stops developing is an old man" (Ford, 2012).

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SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM SUPPORT FOR UNIVERSITIES OF THE THIRD AGE (ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE PODKARPACKIE PROVINCE)

Keywords: government program *Support for Universities of the Third Age*, social activation of seniors, author's original project, seniors' opinions on the government program

Abstract: The ministerial program *Support for University of The Third Age* is a project that considers areas and directions of support enabling the improvement of quality and life standards of the elderly towards dignified aging. In this article I describe the social impact of this program by the implementation of my original project *Passion, professionalism, creativity – the development path of the University of the Third Age*. The beneficiary of the project was the Faculty of Pedagogy at the University of Rzeszów. We invited six other Universities of the Third Age from the Podkarpackie province to cooperate with us. After the project had been completed, I conducted a survey to obtain the feedback from the elderly – participants in the project on their perception of the ministerial program. The article presents the results of the survey and key conclusions concerning the social impact of the presented governmental program.

SPOŁECZNE ODDZIAŁYWANIE PROGRAMU RZĄDOWEGO WSPARCIE UNIwersYTETÓW TRZECIEGO WIEKU (NA PRZYKŁADZIE WOJEWÓDZTWA PODKARPACKIEGO)

Słowa kluczowe: program rządowy *Wsparcie Uniwersytetów Trzeciego Wieku*, aktywizacja społeczna seniorów, autorski projekt, opinie seniorów na temat programu rządowego

Streszczenie: Program ministerialny *Wsparcie Uniwersytetów Trzeciego Wieku* jest przedsięwzięciem uwzględniającym obszary i kierunki wsparcia umożliwiające poprawę jakości i poziomu życia osób starszych na rzecz godnego starzenia się. W artykule opisuję społeczne oddziaływanie tego programu poprzez realizację autorskiego projektu *Pasja, profesjonalizm, kreatywność – drogą rozwoju Uniwersytetu Trzeciego Wieku*. Beneficjentem projektu był Wydział Pedagogiczny Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego. Do współpracy zaprosiliśmy sześć Uniwersytetów Trzeciego Wieku działających w województwie podkarpackim. Po zakończeniu projektu przeprowadziłam badania, które miały na celu pozyskanie od seniorów – uczestników projektu informacji na temat postrzegania przez nich programu ministerialnego. W artykule prezentuję wyniki badań i kluczowe konkluzje dotyczące społecznego oddziaływania zaprezentowanego programu rządowego.