

Lifelong education for older adults in Malta: Current trends and future visions

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Abstract With European demographic developments causing a decline of the available workforce in the foreseeable future and the unsustainability of dominant pay-as-you-go pension systems (where contributions from the current workforce sustain pensioners), governments need to come up with strategies to deal with this upcoming challenge and to adjust their policies. Based on a study carried out between September 2009 and May 2010, this article evaluates the policies guiding late-life education in Malta, as well as the local plethora of learning opportunities for older adult education, and participation rates. The Maltese government is committed to supporting the inclusion of older persons (aged 60+) in lifelong education policies and programmes, to the extent that local studies have uncovered a recent rise in the overall participation of older adults in formal, non-formal and informal areas of learning. While the present and future prospects for late-life education in Malta seem promising, a critical scrutiny of present ideologies and trends finds the field to be no more than seductive rhetoric. Though the coordination of late-life education in Malta does result in various social benefits to older learners and Maltese society in general, it also occurs within five intersecting lines of inequality – namely an economic rationale, elitism, gender bias, the urban-rural divide and third ageism. This article ends by proposing policy recommendations for the future of late-life education.

Keywords Adult and lifelong learning · Older adult education · Late-life education · Educational gerontology · Malta

Résumé Apprentissage tout au long de la vie pour séniors à Malte : tendances actuelles et perspectives d'avenir – Face à l'évolution démographique en Europe qui entraînera une réduction de la main-d'œuvre disponible dans un avenir prévisible, et

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à l'insoutenabilité des systèmes prépondérants de retraite par répartition (par lesquels les cotisations de la main-d'œuvre actuelle financent les retraités), les gouvernements sont appelés à concevoir des stratégies susceptibles de relever ce défi imminent et d'adapter leurs politiques en conséquence. À partir d'une étude réalisée de septembre 2009 à mai 2010, l'auteur de cet article évalue les politiques maltaises guidant l'éducation destinée aux séniors, la surabondance locale d'opportunités d'apprentissage à un âge avancé, et les taux de participation. Le Gouvernement maltais s'attache à favoriser l'inclusion des personnes âgées (de plus de 60 ans) dans les politiques et programmes d'apprentissage tout au long de la vie, dans une telle mesure que des études locales ont constaté une hausse récente de la participation globale des séniors dans les secteurs éducatifs formel, non formel et informel. Alors que les perspectives actuelles et futures de l'éducation à un âge avancé à Malte s'annoncent prometteuses, un examen rigoureux et critique des idéologies et tendances contemporaines révèle que le domaine n'est rien d'autre qu'un discours de séduction. Si la coordination de l'éducation à un âge avancé apporte effectivement divers bénéfices sociaux aux apprenants séniors et à la société maltaise en général, cette éducation s'articule néanmoins autour de cinq axes intersectés d'inégalité : une logique d'économiste, l'élitisme, les préjugés sexistes, le clivage entre régions rurales et urbaines, et un anti-troisième-âgeisme. L'auteur conclut en proposant des recommandations stratégiques pour l'avenir de l'éducation des apprenants séniors.

Zusammenfassung Lebenslanges Lernen für ältere Erwachsene in Malta: aktuelle Trends und Zukunftsperspektiven – Da die demographischen Entwicklungen in Europa in absehbarer Zukunft zu einem Rückgang der erwerbstätigen Bevölkerung führen werden und die vorherrschenden umlagefinanzierten Rentensysteme (bei denen die Renten durch die Beiträge der im gleichen Zeitraum Erwerbstätigen finanziert werden) nicht nachhaltig sind, müssen die Regierungen Strategien entwickeln, um mit dieser bevorstehenden Herausforderung fertigzuwerden, und ihre politischen Maßnahmen daran anpassen. Gestützt auf eine Studie, die zwischen September 2009 und Mai 2010 durchgeführt wurde, werden in diesem Artikel die politischen Strategien Maltas im Bereich der Seniorenbildung sowie die Vielzahl an Bildungsangeboten für ältere Erwachsene und die Beteiligungsquoten evaluiert. Die maltesische Regierung bemüht sich, ältere Menschen (ab 60 Jahren) in die Programme und Politiken für lebensbegleitendes Lernen mit einzubeziehen, und zwar in einem Umfang, dass die Teilnahme älterer Erwachsener an formalen, non-formalen und informellen Bildungsangeboten in letzter Zeit insgesamt zugenommen hat, wie Erhebungen auf kommunaler Ebene zeigen. Zwar erscheinen die Chancen der Seniorenbildung in Malta in Gegenwart und Zukunft vielversprechend, unterzieht man jedoch derzeitige Ideologien und Trends einer kritischen Überprüfung, dann stößt man auf nichts als betörende Worthülsen. Obwohl der Ausbau der Seniorenbildung in Malta für die älteren Lernenden und die maltesische Gesellschaft allgemein diverse soziale Vorteile bringt, bewegt er sich zugleich im Schnittbereich von fünf Bruchlinien der gesellschaftlichen Ungleichheit – nämlich einem ökonomischen Grundprinzip, elitärem Denken, der Benachteiligung von Frauen, dem Stadt-Land-Gefälle und der Diskriminierung von Menschen im dritten Lebensalter. Den Schluss dieses Artikels bilden Politikempfehlungen für die Zukunft der Seniorenbildung.

Resumen Educación permanente para adultos mayores en Malta: tendencias actuales y visiones futuras – En vista de los desarrollos demográficos europeos, que producen un descenso de mano de obra disponible en un futuro previsible y la insostenibilidad de los sistemas de jubilación dominantes, basados en el reparto (donde los aportes de los trabajadores actuales sostienen a los jubilados), los gobiernos deben proponer estrategias para manejar este reto del futuro y ajustar sus políticas. En este trabajo, basado en un estudio realizado entre septiembre del 2009 y mayo del 2010, el autor evalúa las políticas que guían la educación para la tercera edad en Malta, así como la abundancia local de oportunidades de aprendizaje para la educación de adultos mayores y las tasas de participación. El gobierno maltés se ha comprometido a apoyar la inclusión de personas mayores (de 60 y más años de edad) en políticas y programas de educación durante toda la vida, de tal modo que estudios realizados a nivel local revelaron un reciente aumento en la participación general de adultos mayores en áreas de aprendizaje formal, no formal e informal. El presente y las perspectivas futuras de la educación en las etapas avanzadas de la vida parecen ser prometedores en Malta, pero el examen crítico de las ideologías y tendencias actuales indica que esta área no es más que una retórica seductora. Si bien la coordinación de la educación de personas mayores en Malta se traduce en varios beneficios sociales para los educandos mayores y la sociedad maltesa en general, esta, asimismo, tiene lugar dentro de una intersección entre cinco líneas de desigualdad; a saber: una racionalidad económica, elitismo, diferenciación por géneros, división urbano-rural y edadismo relacionado con la tercera edad. El artículo concluye proponiendo recomendaciones estratégicas para el futuro de una educación en las etapas avanzadas de la vida.

Резюме Образование на протяжении всей жизни для взрослых старшего возраста на Мальте: современные тенденции и видение будущего – В связи с демографическими изменениями в Европе, вызывающими сокращение реальной рабочей силы в ближайшем будущем, и неустойчивостью основных пенсионных систем (где текущая рабочая сила поддерживает пенсионеров), правительствам необходимо выстроить соответствующие стратегии для разрешения возникающих проблем и адаптации своей политики. На основе исследования, проведенного с сентября 2009 года по май 2010 года, в данной статье проводится оценка политики «позднего» образования на Мальте, исследуется спектр возможностей обучения для взрослых старшего возраста, а также приводится соотношение числа участников в образовании. Мальтийское правительство поддерживает участие лиц третьего возраста (60 лет и старше) в политике и программах образования взрослых на протяжении всей жизни, так локальные исследования выявили увеличение участия взрослых старшего возраста в формальном, неформальном и информальном обучении за последнее время в целом. Несмотря на то, что текущее положение дел и перспективы развития «позднего» образования на Мальте

кажутся позитивными, критическое исследование современной идеологии и тенденций считает ситуацию не более чем «очаровывающим красноречьем». Хотя в результате координация «позднего» образования на Мальте предоставляет различные социальные преимущества для более старших учащихся и мальтийского общества в целом, на него все-таки оказывают влияние пять пересекающихся линий неравенства, а именно: экономическая причина, элитизм, гендерная предвзятость, разделение город-деревня и дискриминация по отношению к третьему возрасту. В заключение, в статье предлагаются рекомендации относительно политики «позднего» образования на будущее.

Introduction

The current epoch is frequently referred to as the “age of ageing”. The coupling of increasing life expectancies and declining fertility rates means that most Western nation-states have experienced a growing number of older adults in proportion to other age cohorts.¹ In 2007, 11 per cent of the world’s population was aged 60 years or over, a percentage that adds up to a total of some 688 million persons (UN 2010). In view of such demographic transitions, it is not surprising that the education of older adults is currently the fastest-growing branch of adult learning, and the most crucial issue facing educational planning (Withnall 2009). The provision of educational opportunities for older adults now holds centre stage in most intergovernmental and national policies on lifelong learning and ageing populations. One running thread in such documents is a change in emphasis away from the trajectory of the individual’s life course from initial education onwards through work and familial responsibilities right up to retirement and leisure. Instead, public policies advocate a move towards a complex but integrated system that conceptualises education, work and leisure as part and parcel of each stage in the life course (Findsen 2005).

Malta is no exception to such trends. The state is committed to supporting the inclusion of older persons in lifelong learning policies and programmes, to the extent that local studies have uncovered a recent rise in the overall participation of older adults in formal, non-formal and informal areas of learning (Formosa 2009a, b). Higher Education policies in Malta include a maturity clause which exempts older persons from presenting prior qualifications. The University of Malta, which is

¹ There is no commonly agreed definition of “older” persons. The author is thinking of people above the age of 50, which is generally the beginning of a life phase in which there are fewer employment and child-raising responsibilities to commandeer people’s time, before a period where morbidity tends to limit activity and people become dependent on specialised services for some aspects of daily living. However, for statistical purposes, a cut-off point was determined at age 60 which at the time of the study (2009–2010) represented the required age to qualify for the statutory state pension in Malta (to be increased to 65 by the year 2015).

partially funded by the government, subsidises the local University of the Third Age by footing the rent of the premises and lecturer fees. At the same time, the government coordinates and funds weekly learning sessions for older adults in community day centres.

This article focuses on the Maltese experience in lifelong education in later life by analysing both its guiding vision and actual participation rates. While the present and future prospects for late-life education in Malta seem promising, as implied by the increasing opportunities and rising participation rates, a critical scrutiny of present ideologies and trends finds the field to be no more than seductive rhetoric. This argument is presented in seven parts. The first introduces the Maltese setting in which this research article is embedded. After a short explanation of the methodology, the next section surveys the policy direction and vision driving late-life education in Malta, and the local plethora of learning opportunities for, and participation in, late-life education. The fourth and fifth sections highlight the positive and negative implications of late-life education in Malta. Finally, the article proposes policy recommendations for the future of late-life education in Malta, followed by a few concluding remarks.

Education and older persons in Malta

The Maltese archipelago is made up of three islands: Malta, Gozo and Comino. It is located in the Mediterranean Sea with Sicily 93 km to the north, Africa 288 km to the south, Gibraltar 1,826 km to the west and Alexandria 1,510 km to the east. Comino is uninhabited, and with Gozo having a population of just 29,904 persons, leaves Malta as the major island of this archipelago state (NSO 2009a). In 2009, the total population of Malta was 365,568 on a total land area of 315 km², which makes it the most densely populated European Union (EU) Member State (NSO 2010).

Malta's current demographic profile has evolved from a traditional age-sex pyramid to an even-shaped block distribution of equal numbers at each age cohort except at the top (NSO 2007, 2009a, b, 2010). While in 1985 the percentage of the 60+ and 75+ cohorts measured 14.3 and 3.8 per cent, in 2009 these figures reached 22 and 6 per cent respectively (see Table 1). This occurred as the birth rate declined to 1.3 per family, while life expectancy at birth for men / women increased from 70.8 / 76.0 years in 1985 to 77.7 / 81.4 years in 2005. Projections estimate that in the year 2025 the percentage of older persons aged 60+ will rise to 26.5 per cent. The overrepresentation of women increases in older cohorts, with the masculinity ratio for age cohorts in the 80–84, 85–89 and 90+ age brackets reaching 63.0, 57.1 and 48.0 respectively in the year 2005. Single families headed by older females predominate, with older women being more frequent users than older men of health and social care services. In 2007, households comprising of two adults aged 60 or over with no dependent children held an average disposable income of € 14,051, compared to a national average of € 16,085 and € 21,745 for households without and with dependent children respectively. Recent statistics also point out that while

Table 1 Maltese population by sex (2009)

Age	Men	Women	Total	% of population
90+	420	1,055	1,475	0.4
85–89	1,486	2,815	4,301	1.0
80–84	2,992	4,849	7,841	1.9
75–79	4,942	7,414	12,356	3.0
70–74	7,458	9,054	16,512	4.0
65–69	8,785	9,825	18,610	4.5
60–64	14,492	15,110	29,602	7.2
0–59	164,884	157,429	322,273	78
60+	50,415	66,255	90,697	22
60–74	30,735	33,989	64,724	16
75+	9,840	16,133	25,973	6
Total	205,419	207,551	412,970	100

Source National Statistics Office (NSO 2010)

22 per cent of the 65+ cohort are situated below the “at-risk-of-poverty” line (20 and 24 per cent of 65+ women and men respectively²) (Eurostat 2010), the number of employed older persons is also relatively low as only about ten and one per cent of the 55–64 and 65+ cohorts respectively were in paid employment (NSO 2009c).

Similar to international trends, the last census (2005) reported a negative correlation between age and educational status (NSO 2007). As much as 65 per cent of persons in the 60+ cohort had a primary level of education or less, of which 80 per cent held no educational qualifications. Some 17 per cent of persons aged 60+ were illiterate. Although census data are not broken down by gender, research has found older women to hold a lower educational status than men (Formosa 2000, 2005). However, as a result of the implementation of educational policies in the 20th century – especially the Compulsory Education Ordinance in 1946, which raised compulsory school attendance to the age of 14 – older cohorts today boast a better educational record than the preceding ones (Formosa 2009a, b). This means that in the coming two decades the educational disparity between older and younger cohorts will be more equitable.

Methodology

The arguments and recommendations present in this policy position paper are based upon a research study (carried out between September 2009 and May 2010) the goal

² Malta is the only known country where more older men than women experience risk-of-poverty lifestyles. To date, no studies have been conducted to shed light on this idiosyncrasy. However, one possible reason is that the under-declaration of income (for tax purposes) by self-employed men is a common phenomenon in Malta. This situation engenders a situation whereby many older men are in receipt of very low pensions, and therefore represented in risk-of-poverty statistics, when in reality they hold relatively healthy levels of financial savings. If this is the case, this statistical phenomenon is not providing a true picture of risk-of-poverty patterns in late-life Malta.

of which was to review existing policy and participation patterns relating to late-life learning in Malta. This paper comments on two key issues – namely (1) problematising existing (or lacking) policies on more general continuing education programmes in which older adults have the opportunity to participate, as well as specialised third- and fourth-age learning programmes which cater exclusively to older adults, and (2) uncovering and examining the learning needs, interests and preferences of older adults. The verbal data presented here emerged from interviews with a purposive sample of older adult learners.

The national study followed a “case study” research design and included three distinct methodological phases. First, an exploratory phase visiting lifelong learning venues and settings in which older persons participate – such as day care centres, residential settings, village squares, etc. – to attain a tentative impression of late-life learning patterns. Second, an extensive research phase during which European and local policy guidelines on lifelong learning were analysed, and coordinators of adult and continuing education centres were contacted to request information on local participation rates and patterns of older adult learning. The third and final phase consisted in semi-structured interviews with older adult learners. The data analysis followed Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) grounded theory approach which assigns codes, annotations and memos to observation, conversation and interview data.

Late-life education in Malta

Policy

Malta has no national policy on adult or lifelong learning, let alone on education for older adults. Yet, as signatory to the United Nations’ (UN) *Madrid International Plan of Action in Ageing* (MIPAA) Malta has vouched to implement strategies that catalyse the inclusion of older adults in lifelong learning. MIPAA advocated an equality of opportunity throughout life with respect to both adult education and vocational guidance / training. Nation-states were called on to “encourage and promote literacy, numeracy and technological skills training for older persons and the ageing workforce” and to “develop and disseminate user-friendly information to assist older persons to respond effectively to the technological demands of everyday life” (UN 2002, p. 16). Malta is also an EU Member State and hence obliged to promote “all learning activity throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social, and / or employment-related perspective” (European Commission 2001, p. 9). The EU advised its members to ensure adequate “up-skilling and increasing lifelong learning opportunities for older workers [...] in order to keep older workers employable” together with “an expansion of learning provision for retired people [and for] universities to be more open to providing courses for students at a later stage of their life” (European Commission 2006, pp. 8–9). The rationales on late-life learning promoted by both the UN and EU emerge from their concern about the economic effects of global ageing. The twinning of declining fertility rates with the fact that only one in every three people aged 55–64 years is in paid employment

today implies that in the foreseeable future there will not only not be enough potential workers to meet the demand for old age care services, but dominant pay-as-you-go pension systems (where workers' taxes pay for socio-economic benefits received by retirees) will also become unsustainable. The improved training of older workers and adults with a view to extend the skills of older people is thus perceived as being a significant part of the solution (European Commission 2008).

Provision and participation

In Malta, formal learning avenues open to adults above the age of 16 include courses offered by the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS), the Directorate for Lifelong Learning (DLL), the Maltese Council for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) and the University of Malta (UOM). Although there is a distinct preference for the arts and humanities, the overall range of subjects followed is remarkable (Table 2). The upward trend in participation is impressive considering that only half a decade ago no ITS student was over 60, and the older student body at DLL and UOM consisted of just 119 and 18 students respectively (NSO 2003). Yet, overall the situation is inadequate. Only two per cent of Maltese older adults aged 60+ avail themselves of formal learning avenues. It is also disquieting that older learners in formal institutions constitute very low percentages of the total student population: UOM (0.6 per cent), MCAST (0.8 per cent), and ITS (0.8 per cent). Although one key reason for low participation rates is the low educational level of older persons, which imbues them with a lack of desire to pursue further formal study, it is also noteworthy that Higher Education institutions are not passionate about late-life learning. Older adult education does not attract grants and / or offer many career training paths in vocational centres. It thus tends to be ignored and not given any priority in marketing exercises.

Late-life education ranks low on the agenda of local authorities. Out of a total of 68 local councils, only two claimed to be providing learning courses in which adults above the age of 60 participated. The remaining local authorities replied that they do not keep a record of the ages of learning participants, they do not coordinate any lifelong learning events, or that no participants aged 60+ had ever participated in their learning events. This demonstrates little to no coordination of informational advice and educational guidance targeted towards older adults at community level. The Employment and Training Corporation (ETC), which is responsible for the provision of equitable access to training programmes and employment services that contribute towards the social and economic development of the Maltese community, gives no special attention to older adults. Statistics issued by the ETC group all participants aged 55+ in one group so that data on the 60+ age band are not available. The ETC's annual report for 2009 claimed the absolute numbers / percentages of persons above the age of 55 participating in educational courses were as follows: "employment aid programmes" 15 older adult students (4 per cent of total students), "bridging the gap scheme" 1 older adult (1 per cent of total), "work trial scheme" 2 older adults (2 per cent of total), and "mainstream courses" 662 older adults (10 per cent of total). The sparse number of older learners is not

Table 2 Older adult participants (60+) in higher and further learning in Malta (academic year 2009 / 2010)

Course or faculty / institution	Students	Course or faculty / institution	Students
University of Malta			
Centre for Labour Studies	2	Faculty of Theology	16
European Documentation and Research Centre	1	Institute of Agriculture	1
Faculty of Arts	30	Institute of Maltese Studies	1
Faculty of Economics, Management & Accountancy	1	International Institute for Baroque Studies	1
Faculty of Education	2	Mediterranean Institute	3
Faculty of Laws	4	Subtotal	62
Maltese Council for Arts, Science and Technology			
Institute of Agribusiness	6	Institute of Mechanical Engineering	3
Institute of Art and Design	21	Maritime Institute	5
Institute of Business and Commerce	1	Non-certified courses	38
Institute of ICT	4	Subtotal	78
Institute of Tourism Studies			
Food hygiene course	2	Kitchen and larder basic theory and practice	2
Basic German for the hospitality industry	2	Pastry and baking basic theory and practice	1
Pastry and baking Intermediate theory and practice	2	Subtotal	9
Directorate for Lifelong Learning (Ministry for Education, Culture and Youth)			
School of art (Gozo)	284	Basic English	54
Sequence and line dancing	181	Bavarian monastery	51
Lace making	179	Computer awareness	50
Ballroom dancing	116	ECDL core	49
Computer awareness	105	Italian at lifelong learning centre	49
Thread filigree	100	Italian	36
Keep-fit females	76	German at lifelong learning centre	31
Monastery work	55	Other courses	552
		Subtotal	1,968
		Total	2,117

Source Personal communication with respective authorities

surprising considering ETC's policy of not providing educational services to citizens who qualify for the national statutory pension.

The voluntary sector in Malta consists of a plethora of unrelated and unconnected bodies. Voluntary bodies have limited income and depend for survival on donations and volunteers, so that it is not possible for them to channel enough human resources to maintain a database of information on either the activities or age of

participants. Although the different organisations in the voluntary sector invest a significant amount of energy in the promotion of educational activities that advocate their respective ethos, a lack of knowledgeable staff on adult and late-life learning results in few specific opportunities for older learners. On the positive side, older adults tend to form the majority in a number of available learning courses such as for example “Culture”, which includes seven informative outings (this course is organised twice yearly by the Academy for the Development of Democratic Environment) and “EduCafé”, in which various professionals from the social, legal and medical fields conduct informative sessions in a popular central cafeteria (this course is organised monthly by the Fundazzjoni Reggie Miller). On the downside, pre-retirement education is the exception rather than the rule, and where it occurs, participants complain of the didactic and authoritarian style of most presentations which imbue them with some level of concern and anxiety rather than a positive view of retirement (Formosa 2009a).

In local neighbourhoods, one finds two key providers of late-life learning – namely the parish church and community day centres. Parish priests in both town and rural communities coordinate information sessions for older residents on a variety of issues. Visits to a number of sessions, held once a week in the morning, attract only a limited number of participants (around 20) in each session, all of them women (indeed, sessions are informally perceived by participants and the general public as older women’s circles). Sessions are chaired by the parish priest or his delegate and include strong religious overtones as they take place following Mass; they begin and end by reciting short prayers and always take place either in small chapels or in unused rooms in churches. Participants find sessions an important source of health-related information, and more importantly, social networking. It is, however, disappointing that no effort is evident to encourage the participation of men or non-practising Roman Catholics.

Malta has 16 community day centres which, despite their designation, are run by the government and provide membership to persons aged 60 or over (again, mostly female) and younger persons with mild cognitive disabilities. Officially, these centres serve as social and learning hubs, and much fanfare was recently made when every centre was equipped with two computers with internet access. Visits to a number of centres find them serving more as social than as learning hubs, with bingo sessions being run almost daily, although some do organise health-related information sessions and members are encouraged to work on a variety of crafts which tend to be displayed around the centres. Both parish and community sessions follow a conservative agenda where their rationale is to help older persons adjust to the social problems brought on by ageing such as isolation, loneliness and widowhood, rather than by a quest to empower participants through, for example, financial literacy sessions.

The University of the Third Age (UTA), set up in 1993, is the only voluntary institution in Malta that caters solely to the learning interests of older adults and keeps a meticulous record of its membership, which can be easily acquired by those who have passed their 60th birthday and are willing to pay a nominal registration fee of € 12. Some 643 persons (198 men, 445 women) applied for UTA membership at the beginning of the 2009 / 2010 academic year (NSO 2009c). Despite its

positive functions, the local UTA is far from an example of democratic learning, as its practice is highly biased in favour of the needs of female middle-class urban older persons (Formosa 2000, 2007, 2009a). The most recent data which break down membership by past occupations report that only one member among the 2005 / 2006 student body listed her past work as an elementary occupation, while a significant number – 209 (or 29 per cent) – had held professional roles (NSO 2006). Moreover, the data also show that a majority of members lived in the Northern and Southern Harbour regions (67 per cent) where UTA's premises are located.

One final issue relating to non-formal learning concerns fourth-age learning, which refers to initiatives for older people facing mobility and mental challenges, and who are typically housebound or living in residential and nursing homes. While 2009 saw a total of 3,842 older persons living in some 40 residential and nursing homes in Malta (NSO 2010), a national study on old age care estimated the total number of frail elderly people living in the community aided by a variety of formal and informal care services to be around 15,000 (Formosa and Troisi 2006). Frail elderly people are completely left out in the cold where late-life learning is concerned, since currently there exists neither a distance learning service nor an outreach programme aiming to meet the health, social, and emotional learning needs of housebound seniors or those of their carers. The number of residential homes is likely to increase substantially in the coming years. In 2010 the government received as many as 26 applications by private companies to open new homes (*The Malta Independent on Sunday* 2010). Learning opportunities in such venues are extremely limited. The smaller residential homes, both those run by the state and those run privately, offer the least opportunities for learning, with residents spending most of the days lined up in corridors or sitting in their rooms, and with staff claiming a lack of interest on behalf of residents. Better opportunities are found in St. Vincent de Paul's Residence, which houses more than 1,000 individuals, and where a full-time occupational therapist is employed together with a number of part-time assistants to run social and cultural activities. This residence also organises "reminiscence" sessions for cognitively impaired residents. A number of state-run and up-market homes also coordinate social outings and health-related information sessions for residents. While these are surely positive developments, there are two key problematic issues. First, licences to open and run residential and nursing homes for older persons do not mandate providers to coordinate and organise learning activities for residents, and annual inspections of quality of care levels are restricted solely to the satisfactory meeting of health needs and safety issues. Second, social and cultural activities do not necessarily include a learning component. It is a concern that personnel responsible for "learning activities" (sic), usually ranging from home administrators to paramedical officers, have absolutely no training in what constitutes good practice in third- and fourth-age learning. At present, the European Centre of Gerontology at the University of Malta offers no module on educational gerontology, although it is welcoming to note that the Master's in Adult Education organised by the Faculty of Arts does include two modules on late-life learning.

Older adult education: A model for active ageing

The provision of education for Maltese older adults, in both formal and non-formal avenues, is based on the ideology of “active ageing”. The genesis of active ageing can be traced back to the 1950s and early 1960s when it was argued that the key to ageing successfully was the continued maintenance of active patterns and values typical of middle age for as long as possible in the life course (Havighurst 1954; Havighurst and Albrecht 1953). This vision accepts the realities of genetically-driven bio-molecular processes leading to death but, nevertheless, believes that it is possible to maintain healthy ageing through lifestyle modification (Andrews 2002). Active ageing is fêted within older adult education circles because in addition to promising that the gradual decline associated with later life is actually modifiable and reversible, it also provides a means of countering the negative stereotyping of older people. Indeed, late-life education in Malta is treated akin to “intellectual jogging”, exercising mental muscles to avoid atrophy. This vision therefore promises successful ageing by replacing those relationships, activities and roles which are made defunct by occupational retirement with new ones that enable retirees to maintain life satisfaction.

Reflecting other international research (Swindell 1993, 1997; Yenerall 2003; Huang 2005, 2006), many learners claim to find their participation in educational classes as indispensable in overcoming the various social and psychological challenges brought on by the onset of later life:

Retirement is not easy to get used to. At first, you are pleased to have ample time to do all those things that you always wanted to do but never had the time for. After some time, you find that you ticked all the items on your “to do” list and boredom creeps in. I used to dread finishing breakfast because there wasn’t much to do afterwards except wait for lunch ... The University of the Third Age gave me a new lease of life. I had somewhere to go, and it gave me an opportunity to use my time productively. No more idle mornings for me!³

Both my daughters left home as much as fifteen years ago. The both live in London. I missed my grandchildren. I used to stay indoors, afraid that I meet my neighbours’ grandchildren on my way out ... Learning German was my way out of that rut. Time flies when listening to language tapes or doing homework. I am now able to have a decent conversation in German. I have been twice to Germany recently, and was able to converse with native people. It gave me an enormous self-confidence. I feel very good, I feel a sense of achievement which I lacked before.⁴

Older adult education in Malta is typified by a sense of vitality and dynamism that goes beyond what is usually the case in normal adult education. When members were asked what they gained from involvement in educational activities, the first thing that came to their mind was social outcomes, such as making new friends and

³ Interview with male learner (aged 63) at the University of the Third Age, 19 April 2010.

⁴ Interview with female learner (aged 65) participating in an evening class programme, 24 April 2010.

locating support groups which help them through difficult periods in their personal life. Late-life education was also found to fulfil various positive social and personal functions such as aiding lonely older persons to re-socialise themselves by increasing their interests, as well as providing opportunities and stimulation for the use and structure of free time which would otherwise be characterised by inactivity. This was especially true for widows:

When my husband died, I became depressed. I was totally unprepared. I had no one to speak with at home and nothing to look forward to. I did not go out for more than a year ... I finally plucked up enough courage to enrol to read for a degree in Theology. At first, I used my studies to compensate for the loss of my husband, but now I study just for the sake of learning. I have made a lot of friends here, some are widows, others are still married to their husbands but are more than ready to meet me for a coffee. Life is good now. Reading for a degree has opened a new life for me.⁵

Participation in educational courses also developed in learners a joyful and progressive delight in life, increased the social integration and harmony of older persons in society, and injected them with a sense of creativity, while making them more visible in society. It is also noteworthy that educational opportunities improved members' abilities of understanding the world as a whole by aiding them to better grasp global development and social progress, and helped them to ameliorate their abilities of maintaining their own health by enabling them to master medical care knowledge and prevention of disease:

Learning philosophy is like looking at the world with new spectacles. I used to work first in the army and then in security. You were not allowed to think, you just obeyed orders. I also had three children and until they left the home, most of my time was focused as how to make ends meet. Now I am not only relaxing by learning about Plato, Heidegger and Sartre. I have started to look at the world differently. I tell my wife that I am a new man now. Luckily, she likes this "new" man [laughing].⁶

Lessons here change your life. What I mean is that before I started attending the day centre I used to do a million-and-one things which I should not have been doing. Like, for example, doing no exercise and following an unhealthy diet. We have nurses and other medical professionals come here telling us how to change our life for the better or at least not making it worse. I had back pain for years but a physiotherapist gave me a number of daily exercises which made it go away after a couple of weeks.⁷

However, the "active ageing" rationale is not without its problems. The next section focuses on the limitations of the provision of older adult education in Malta.

⁵ Interview with female learner (aged 66), university undergraduate, 16 April 2010.

⁶ Interview with male learner (aged 68) participating in an evening class programme, 5 May 2010.

⁷ Interview with female learner (aged 66) at a community day centre learning event, 20 April 2010.

Critical issues

Political economy

While it is positive to note the emphasis on the need to provide learning opportunities for older cohorts found in UN and EU policy documents, regrettably these are more driven to espousing the “human capital” and “vocational” value of older people than otherwise. It is assumed that older adults find social value only by becoming part of the pool of surplus labour when, in actual fact, there is little evidence supporting the usefulness of a human capital theory for older persons (Cole 2000). An “economistic” rationale dominates, so that late-life learning is not promoted for its possible “empowering” potential. Rather, emphasis is put on the potential of late-life education to render post-industrial societies more “competitive in the face of the transitional and multinational corporations’ ability to reap the advantages of economies of scale through the expansion of international capital mobility” (Borg and Mayo 2006, p. 18). It is also problematic that the drive to improve the skills of older workers is not concerned with the various abilities needed by the wide range of productive sectors, but focuses specifically on those competencies required by the information and communication technologies (ICT) industry. However, the need to help older people stay in paid work is only one of the priorities in late-life education. Other priorities include recognising the diversity of older persons, challenging stereotypes of ageing, maximising participation, maintaining personal independence, and retaining a sense of purpose and meaning. This does not mean that policies seeking to improve the skills of older adults should be thrown out of the window, since the crucial role of productive ageing to well-being is well documented (Morrow-Howell 2010), but it is important to emphasise that the vocationalisation of older adult education will not on its own solve the future structural lag in employment or non-sustainability of pensions. If the integration of older persons into the labour market is to become a real possibility, policies need to break down barriers to labour market entry with active and preventive measures such as job search assistance, guidance and training. Late-life learning policies must therefore be supplemented by measures that break down barriers between age groups in the workplace, by taking a holistic approach to the needs and wishes of older workers with respect to motivation, time management, and income and social protection issues. Older adults are empowered to combine partial retirement with part-time work only in so far as work remains within their capability as their life circumstances change.

At the same time, one cannot underestimate the dark side of “active ageing” rationales in lifelong learning policies (Slowey 2008). The vision promoted by active ageing is in certain respects too idealistic, and places an unrealistic expectation on ageing individuals to maintain the levels of activity associated with middle age (Walker 2002). In educational settings, positive ageing operates within an “individual pathology” model that sees older adults as deficient following their loss of familial and work responsibilities. Active ageing overlooks how unique backgrounds and circumstances of later life – such as social class, gender and age discrimination – have an immense impact on motivation and aptitude to participate

in educational activities. The frenzy towards active ageing also renders the dominant provision of late-life learning unable to consider the diversity of later life based on social and cultural preferences, and supports an environment where the most powerful perspective acquires a moral dimension to the detriment of those who end up on the wrong side of the equation. While it implicitly castigates older people who do not wish to or cannot embrace the “busy” ethic as being in some way deviant, it is “intellectual” and “highbrow” learning initiatives that derive most encouragement and approval. Moreover, while there is some medical evidence concerning the beneficial results of continued mental stimulation in later life with regard to the maintenance of good health (Wolf 2006), little of this work actually impacts on the education of older adults in a systematic way, or has tended to proceed on the basis of a range of clinically unproven assumptions (Withnall 2009). Fiona Aldridge and Peter Lavender (2000) even report that some older adults experience “dis-benefits” from participating in a learning experience such as stress, anxiety and relationship difficulties.

Class

Although opportunities are open to everybody, learning bodies are predominantly middle-class. Few older learners hold lower levels of education, were employed in blue-collar occupations, or are illiterate. The prevalence of middle-class members should not come as a total surprise considering that a liberal arts curriculum is perceived as alien by working-class elderly people who tend to experience “at-risk-of-poverty” lifestyles (Formosa 2009b). The middle-class nature of the learning experience was especially evident at the local UTA. Its middle-classness was also evident by the learners’ pursuit of expressive lifestyles, their eagerness to instruct themselves in the bourgeois ethos of freedom, and their close affinity with traditional intellectuals. The predominance of middle-class adults at UTA did not arise by coincidence but through a number of social closure tactics which made the learning experience unappealing to older adults with low levels of cultural capital. Most centrally, the choice of subjects – such as “History and appreciation of art” and “The many faces of Pirandello” – provided an alien environment to those from working-class milieux. The predominance of middle-class elderly people at UTA also reflects the ways in which older persons attempt to improve, or at least to maintain, their position in the class hierarchy. As previous identities and statuses associated with one’s occupational position are erased and become meaningless, retirement acts as a “status leveller” by putting persons from different class backgrounds closer together in the hierarchical social space. To offset such a levelling experience, middle-class elderly people enrol in UTA to acquire the label of “cultured”. In the way that books and paintings are used to impress friends and other social viewers, UTA membership becomes employed as a strategy of “distinction” (Bourdieu 1984).

Gender

A gender “lens” finds educational opportunities discriminating against both women and men. On one hand, learning bodies overlook the unique barriers faced by older

women such as their low expectations of their successful participation in educational pursuits, their difficulties reaching learning centres due to inadequate transport amenities, and problems in finding time for educational pursuits when caring is so time-consuming. There is a distinct “masculinist” discourse within UTA where women are generally silenced and made passive through their invisibility. In sum, the learning experience provides too firm a stand on providing learning *to* women instead of *for* women. On the other hand, the low percentage of men signals strongly that for a number of reasons opportunities for late-life education are not attractive to them. Primarily, third-age educational activities are promoted through avenues – such as health programmes on the broadcasting media or through leaflets at health centres – where most of the clients are women. Second, late-life education is “feminised”. Not only is the membership mostly female, but so are management committees. Men feel threatened by the presence of all these older women, and do not wish to become involved with organisations they perceive to be dominated by women. Third, courses tend to reflect the interests of the female membership. For instance, health promotion courses at UTA, despite being open to all, are delivered by female tutors with a bias towards women-related health issues such as weight loss and osteoporosis. Indeed, older adult education in Malta is devoid of male images, voices, and interests such as astronomy, botanical and zoological studies.

Third ageism

The movement for older adult education in Malta celebrates and promotes its ethos at the expense of older and more defenceless people – namely those in the fourth age. It is assumed that only mobile and healthy elderly people are capable of engaging in educational classes, and no effort is made to reach those persons who, due to various physical and mental difficulties, are precluded from reaching classroom settings. At the same time, the field is devoid of efforts to link older adults with younger and older peers in intergenerational education. The underlying assumption here is that children, middle-aged and “old” old persons (circa aged 75+) have little, if any, contributory potential towards third-age learning. Late-life education follows Peter Laslett’s (1996, p. 4) definition of the “third age” as a “period of personal fulfilment, following the second stage of independence, maturity, responsibility, earning, and saving, and preceding the fourth age of final dependence, decrepitude and death”. As a result, the goal is to target older adults who are “young” old, able-bodied and mentally fit. However, there are significant numbers of “young” old persons facing mobility and mental challenges. Even at a relatively young age, often well before statutory retirement, many older adults experience complications from strokes, diabetes and neurological diseases so that their functional mobility and intellectual resources become seriously limited (UNECE 2010). Moreover, “old” old persons who experience significant mobility and mental problems, even to the extent of having to enter residential and nursing care homes, may still harbour and strive for a “third-age” lifestyle (Jarvis 2001).

Rural issues

According to the last Maltese census, almost half of the 60+ cohort live in what are classified as “rural” areas – that is, farms, towns and small cities located outside urban or metropolitan areas (NSO 2007). In Malta, educational opportunities for older adults are generally located in the Northern and Southern Harbour regions, which surround the nation’s capital city and effectively function as the nation’s socio-economic hub. The problem here is twofold. First, living in rural areas presents a strong barrier to participation in late-life education since residents find it difficult to travel to metropolitan areas. Many (especially women) neither own a driving license nor a car, and live in areas where public transport (if any) is very limited. The absence of outreach work on behalf of formal and non-formal educational providers means that rural older adults are left out in the cold, and that state subsidies towards late-life education are disproportionately spent on meeting the needs and interests of older adults living in urban and metropolitan areas. Second, providers overlook that rural older adults have unique learning needs and interests. Many aspects of rural life are viewed nostalgically. However, the reality of a leisurely lifestyle, and quality contacts with relatives, friends and neighbours, are offset by unfavourable features such as lack of public transportation, inadequate social and health care services, and lower income and standards of living (Phillipson and Scharf 2005). This calls for outreach educational initiatives with middle-aged and older adults in rural areas to help them plan for a satisfactory retirement and master the challenges brought on by the onset of later life respectively. Nevertheless, to date there exists no drive to sensitise the educational environment to the life situation of rural older adults.

Policy recommendations

Government level

There is an urgent need for a national policy on lifelong learning that includes a sound emphasis on later life. This framework must be guided by a rationale that reinstates lifelong learning in the (pre-Third Way⁸) values of social levelling, social cohesion and social justice (Faure 1972). Only thus will it become possible for late-life education to prioritise the “democratic citizen” over the “future worker citizen” as the prime asset of post-industrial societies (Lister 2003). A national policy should also include a strategy for “widening participation” so as to respond to older adults who are still educationally excluded and socially disadvantaged. Providers must think out of the box so that late-life learning initiatives attract older adults with working-class backgrounds, older men, elderly people living in rural regions, and

⁸ The term “third way” refers to a centre-left progressive form of politics, created as a serious alternative to political projects that engendered the collapse of international belief in the viability of economic markets advocating a liberal-market ideology. However, this vision has been criticised by various commentators for supporting a class-based conception of socialism, and for promoting idealist solutions to the problems of inequality and polarisation (Kaspersen 2000).

housebound seniors. There must be serious attempts in outreach work which facilitate learning opportunities outside formal settings with older adults who could or would not usually participate in traditional formally organised provision. Teaching vulnerable older people ICT and e-learning strategies, aiming to bring about improved levels of personal transformation, constitutes a key priority on a “widening participation” agenda. Moreover, there is a need for the Higher Education sector to play a key role in encouraging new types of adult learning through all phases of the course of life by incorporating a clear obligation towards older learners. In addition to employment-related programmes that support older people moving from full-time employment to various forms of work, Higher Education must also provide “personal development” programmes which identify new types of courses and markets among a diverse and segmented post-50s market, and “health and social care” programmes orientated towards professionals working with older people that vary from foundation degrees through to modules for continuing professional development. It is augured that the University of Malta, especially through the auspices of the European Centre of Gerontology, provides specific training for prospective educators of both active and frail elderly people residing in the community and residential homes respectively.

Community level

In meeting their responsibility towards the welfare and well-being of their communities, local councils must lobby the central government to be awarded an explicit role and responsibility in the planning, coordination and financing of age-related services including adult and late-life learning. In partnership with third sector agencies, local councils must take on the role of learning hubs that bring all the “providers (public, private, and voluntary) together, to coordinate resources [...] and promote learning among older people” (McNair 2009, p. 17). Local authorities must join forces to prepare an explicit policy statement on older learners that sets and monitors targets for participation. This would warrant as broad a range as possible of community learning opportunities for older adults through collaboration between education and other regional services, ranging from health and social services to leisure organisations. Financial support and fee policies should be designed to help those with least initial schooling and those with the lowest levels of income. Moreover, there must be an awareness that an educational system that spends some 12 years, and substantial financial capital, on preparing citizens for the world of work, but not more than a couple of afternoons (if lucky) to leave it, is clearly biased against older persons. Society has an obligation towards its citizens to provide them with learning initiatives that help them plan for their third and fourth ages. It is noteworthy that a truly democratic pre-retirement education is not simply instruction about the formalities surrounding pensions, the drawing up of a will, and health. It is one which also includes a discussion of psychological and social strategies that lead older adults to improve their quality of life. Finally, local authorities must recognise the empowering benefits of coordinating educational activities that link older adults with children, teenagers, adults and even much older

peers and coordinate educational initiatives that increase cooperation, interaction or exchange between different generations.

Fourth-age learning

Since learning is a human process that covers every aspect of human living, educational opportunities must be directed at frail persons as well as their carers. Learning initiatives must be made available, free of charge, to relatives and volunteers involved in the care of older persons. Of course, the link between mental fitness and good health is a slippery one and may never be unequivocally resolved. Yet older people who continue to engage in cognitively stimulating activities have been found to be in a better position to adopt strategies assisting them to augment their well-being and independence (Jarvis 2001). Malta is thus called on to:

- provide learning opportunities for informal family carers of older persons to enable them to focus on the dynamics of caring, empower the lifelong development of frail elderly people, and anticipate and recognise the needs of the person under care;
- include outreach strategies – such as mobile library services, intergenerational linkages, and visiting learning bodies – that bring the learning experiences to the homes of housebound seniors; and
- coordinate educational sessions in residential and nursing homes so that all older persons, even those suffering from confusion or dementia, have an opportunity to participate in third-age learning.

Naturally, we have to recognise that such individuals will be less productive in quantitative terms. However, as an emergent body of literature strongly demonstrates, the quality of learning participation, processes and outcomes in “fourth-age learning” is impressive and exceeds all expectations (Housden 2007; Aldridge 2009).

Conclusion

This critical overview of public policy and opportunities relating to older adult education in Malta argues that the current dominant vision for learning is anything but lifelong, and that older adults are underrepresented as far as educational policy is concerned. While there is no doubt that policy documents and action plans dealing with some aspect of late-life learning may be well-intentioned, ultimately they function as nothing more than empty rhetoric concealing neo-liberal values. For instance, despite the dedication of the UN International Literacy Year in 1990, and the dedication of the year 2010 to the combat of social exclusion and poverty, there is still very little research, policy or educational practice relating to vulnerable older persons. The article also highlights that although older adult education includes a number of positive functions for learners and society in general, its practice ignores the larger structural issues that affect people’s ability to participate in learning activities. It is in this spirit that the article proposes a number of policy

recommendations for late-life education. Of course, the road towards a successful policy and action plan on lifelong and late-life learning is not without obstacles. The hegemonic grip of “Third Way” politics (Giddens 1998), which celebrate the human capital model of development and individuated lifestyles, has led to an almost absence of philosophical reflection on the empowering potential of late-life learning. On a more practical level, public resources may be seriously limited, which necessitates collaboration with voluntary and third-sector resources and self-organising provision, which may lead to further logistic and organisational difficulties. Such issues are surely not easily resolved but, in the spirit of the critical paradigm, there is real hope if local and global movements collaborate to include older adult education in the values of social justice and social equity.

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