

Universitat de les Illes Balears

LOS PROGRAMAS UNIVERSITARIOS
PARA MAYORES EN LA
CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL ESPACIO
EUROPEO DE ENSEÑANZA SUPERIOR

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UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES FOR THE THIRD AGE IN THE CREATION OF A EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays there is a broad consensus that continuing participation in learning throughout life is beneficial to economic prosperity, social solidarity, as well as psychological maturity of the society as a whole. However, it is also true that this judgment has not transformed traditional educational practice, and there remains a sharp division of educational opportunities between younger and older people. The University of Malta has no university programmes for the third age. At present, the University does not have anything that approximates a University Extension Service Department or a Department of Extra-Mural Studies. However, this is not to say that the University of Malta is oblivious to the gerontological revolution as it includes a European Centre of Gerontology which coordinates a University of the Third Age. Without doubt, educational gerontologists should open themselves to the European Space for Higher Education.

RESUMEN

Actualmente existe un amplio consenso respecto a que la participación en el aprendizaje mantenida a lo largo de toda la vida es beneficiosa para la prosperidad económica y la solidaridad social, así como para la madurez psicológica de la sociedad en su conjunto. No obstante, también es cierto que esta percepción no ha transformado las prácticas educativas tradicionales, y sigue existiendo una profunda división entre las oportunidades educativas de los jóvenes y las de las personas mayores. La Universidad de Malta no cuenta con programas universitarios para la tercera edad. Hasta la fecha, la Universidad no dispone de nada que se asemeje a un departamento de servicios de extensión universitaria o un departamento de estudios externos.

PRELUDE

Nowadays there is a broad consensus that continuing education is beneficial to economic prosperity, social solidarity, as well as to the psychological maturity of society as a whole. However, this judgment has not transformed traditional educational practice, and there remains a sharp division of educational opportunities between younger and older people. Indeed, one consistent fact throughout the Southern European and Mediterranean region, especially when one looks at the Maltese scenario, is the lack of educational provision for third agers. One is triggered to ask "Why?": *Why is older adult education emphasised in both the popular media and academic literature*, but then – as happened recently in Malta – *when the University of Malta coordinated a computer course for third agers it ends up being reported in newspapers?* Did this occur from our joy at knowing that older personal are involved in a educational session, or because it is not socially "non-normal" for third agers to engage in educational meetings, and let alone, computer courses?

This document was, of course, not written as a practical manual that asks how such programmes should be set up, co-ordinated and administered. It is rather an attempt to review the phenomenon of the provision for third age university education. Consequently, this document contains four major sections. *First*, I will introduce briefly the situation in Malta. *Secondly*, I will address the Bologna Declaration on a European Higher Education Area vis-à-vis the realm of educational gerontology. The third section presents what I believe is good practice in third age university programmes. *Finally*, I will share with you my concerns regarding the path of the educational gerontological community in the foreseeable future. In a nutshell, this presentation seeks to answer irreducible questions:

- How can we increase the number of university programmes for third agers? And
- To what end should third age university programmes be coordinated?

However, before getting any further, I feel that have to make clear my interpretation of the “third age” concept. With all due respect to the late Peter Laslett, a true inspiration throughout my academic life, I do not concur fully with his interpretation of the third age. Whilst I agree with his definition of the third age as a “period of personal fulfilment, following the second stage of independence, maturity, responsibility, earning, and saving”, I am more cautious about positing it as “preceding the fourth age of final dependence [and] decrepitude” (Laslett, 1989,4).

Following Michael Young and Tom Schuller (1991, p.181) I believe that this tarnishes the fourth age, and hence, shifts the labelling problem “older and more defenceless people”. Laslett’s view that it is impossible to banish physical debility at the life courses is, of course, realistic. Yet, disabled and frail older persons still find much to live for, and thus, can take the role of the most positive of third agers. Therefore, my approach does not limit third ageness to young-old older persons why are active in the “normal” sense but refers to flexible form of successful ageing that has different interpretation according to different levels of physical, social and cultural capital.

UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES FOR THE THIRD AGE IN MALTA

Focusing on Malta, you may know that the Maltese Archipelago consists of a series of limestone blocks with a surface area of 312 square kilometres. Malta is the main island and supports 94 per cent of the population.

Malta has only one university, the *University of Malta*, which owes much of its origins to a Jesuit-run college set up by direct paper intervention as early as 1592. The University of Malta has no university programmes for the third age. At present, it does not have anything that approximates a *University Extension Service Department* or a *Department of a ExtraMural Studies*. The University has no special regulations or arrangements for persons aged 60 or over, although persons aged 23 years and over can enter University without any qualifications whatsoever provided they pass a basic interview. This is, nevertheless, only applicable to undergraduate courses in the humanities and not in the faculties of law, medicine, education, engineering or architecture. As a matter of fact there are only 28 persons aged 60 or over who are reading for a degree at the University of Malta from a total population of almost 9.500 students. This translates to less half a percent of the total population of the University of Malta .

This is not the same as saying that the University of Malta is oblivious to the gerontological revolution. In 1989, the University established an International Institute of Gerontology, recently renamed as the European Centre of Gerontology, with the mandate to develop

inter-disciplinary teaching, education and research in the field of ageing. The Centre conducts a 9 month programme leading to a *Postgraduate Diploma in Gerontology and Geriatrics* and a 18 month research programme leading to *Master's Degree in the same subjects*. These degrees were designed by an international group of experts during a meeting on long-term training in gerontology and geriatrics which was convened in 1989 by the United Nations International Institute on Ageing, with the participation of representatives from WHO and UNESCO. Both programmes, which are run on a full-time basis, offer a unique opportunity for a systematic multi-disciplinary training of people who are either directly involved in the field of ageing or who aspire to embark on a gerontological career. To-date 108 foreign students from 56 different countries, as well as 95 Maltese citizens have read for the Postgraduate Diploma. Another 22 students read for the Masters' Degree.

Moreover, the Centre organises pre-retirement programmes for older workers. Each programme consists of 20 sessions, each of two hours' duration. It is aimed at enabling employees who will be retiring from employment, to prepare themselves for a new lifestyle, socially, economically, psychologically and healthwise. Thirteen lecturers from various disciplines deal with a wide variety of topics, including nutrition and healthy eating; solitude in old age; successful ageing; social benefits and programmes; role and status of older persons, budgeting in old age; ethical aspects; legal aspects; caring for an older persons; and basic principles in First Aid.

At the same time, the European Centre of Gerontology contains a unique arrangement for third agers as its co-ordinates a *University of the Third Age*. The U3A was launched in January 1993, as part of the Institute of Gerontology within the University of Malta, and therefore, more in accordance with the French U3A model than the British. The drive behind the founding of the U3A arose neither from community needs nor older persons themselves but directly from university professors. Indeed, the first U3A programme was not launched as a pilot project but as a full-scale activity, one which reflected the aspirations of academics working in gerontology. The lectures are not conducted on campus but in two neighbouring cities. Recently, we have also opened another branch in Malta's sister island, Gozo. Although these cities are all more centrally located than the campus, conducting the U3A lectures away from the University means that this third age programme is having no impact upon the mother institution except, of course, in economic and administrative ways.

Here, I feel that we –as educational gerontologists have to ask: Why did we estrange older students from the normal students? What effect is this having on the third age students? What *effect* is this having on Maltese society as a whole?

One here may recollect Michel Foucault's (1967) argument that people's lives are socially determined and produced through discourses which position subjects in a spatial field of power relations. Consequently, it can be argued that this segregated approach towards third age education is perhaps tantamount to the act of marginalizing older persons in an acceptable and humanist manner.

Segregating older persons fails to respond adequately to the needs and problems of older adults, are too specific to provide differentiated and specialised course programmes, estrange older persons from the rest of population, inclined to be inferior learning centers, and finally embody low levels in the quality of educational experience and courses offered. At the same time, intergenerational educational centres can lead to greater tolerance, increased comfort and intimacy, partial dissolving of rigid stereotypes, decreasing one's fear of the "Other", and finally, engendering positive attitudes between persons coming from different age generations. However, on the other hand, I also found that for certain sensitive subjects

life elder abuse or for subject which only pertain to elder persons a segregated approach is preferred. It thus seems that a mixture of both approaches is warranted. However, the level of combination of each level still has to be ascertained.

Theoretically, the U3A is open to everybody who is over 60 years old, and willingness to pay a very nominal registration fee. The U3A increased its membership from 180 in 1993, to about 900 last year – a remarkable 500% increase.

The average U3A member is in the 60 – 70 age, cohort, female, married if female and widowed if female, relatively better educated than his/her older peers, largely middle class, healthy, financially secure, previously employed in a professional occupation, inclined to a certain language style pertinent to an educational environment, and predisposed to learn subjects in the humanities (Formosa, 2000). Nevertheless, one must point out that this includes less than 2% of all persons aged 60 and over in Malta. Of course lack interest, low income and status, and low education levels are all major barriers to participation. Indeed, amongst the cohort age 60 or over, as much as 17.5% have no schooling experience and with 23% left school during their primary school years, and 81% have no qualifications whatsoever (NSO, 1998).

At this point it is a good idea to shift our focus on the Bologna Declaration on *European Space for Higher Education*, as it is surely a highly pertinent pronouncement vis-à-vis our concerns (Erasmus, 2003).

TOWARDS A EUROPEAN SPACE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

As once of the 29 countries which signed the Declaration, Malta has embarked on a binding commitment to reform its educational system so as to facilitate mobility and recognition of qualifications. Undoubtedly, the Declaration is a key statement on higher education policy and reform in Europe. Its significance is particularly relevant when one considers that the recognition of qualifications within an enlarged Europe depends on the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees. In today's era of globalisation, such recognition will also play an important role in facilitating employability in all participating countries due to the greater of transparency in academic recognition.

Without doubt, educational gerontologists should open themselves to the *European Space for Higher Education*. This is because the Declaration can proliferate numerous new avenues. By stressing so explicitly the need for European higher education as a cohesive system, it provides educational gerontologists a possibility to move in the direction of a coherent European system. At the same time it invites European institutions to compete more resolutely than in the past for students, influence, prestige and money in the world-wide competition of universities. However, and I can never overemphasise this, these advantages do not mean that we should embrace the Declaration in an oblivious manner. Every social population has its own distinct needs and interests, and older cohorts are no exception. Consequently, my opinion is that whilst the six-goal-tier found in the Declaration are commendable to the average students, irrespective of age, I believe that in a micro-gerontological-lifeworld they have to be re-defined so as to accommodate the common and various needs of third agers. Only so will the Declaration do justice to the specific needs and interests of older learners. I will now go over the Declaration's six major goals.

Its first goal is to *deploy a system of easily readable and comparable degrees so that citizens can effectively use their qualifications, competencies and skills throughout the European Higher Education Area*. We know that for some third age, assessment and accreditation techniques are a considerable incentive. However, for others they constitute an intimidating

challenge –especially to new learners at the point of joining a course. While those who are confident consumers of learning are well able to exercise choice over accreditation, and appreciate that a certified course is cheaper, those new to learning are not likely to feel that they are able to take it on unless they receive very skilful guidance. Others stills, even look down on the contagious “diploma disease” and look forward to learn in way that are antithesis from schooling’s obsession with official recognition.

Of course, there is much evidence of the value of accreditation to learners who have not achieved qualifications in initial education and who, over time, became more comfortable with it. However, it still remains that a prerequisite for the deployment of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees for third agers to reduce the distinct educational barriers faced by older persons so that increases the number of third agers taking part in third age university programmes. Similar to what is found in international literature (e.g. Schuller and Bostyn, 1992), my fieldwork in Malta pointed to three major forms of barriers.

- First, **attitudinal barriers**, such as disbelieving and being able to learn, embarrassment, lack of education when younger, no confidence, interest and motivation, waiting to rest or avoiding new commitments after a lifetime of work, and fear of technological failure.

- Second, **situational constraints**, which refer to personal constraints which are beyond the learner’s control and are related to one’s life situation at a particular time. This includes time scheduling, illness, hearing, vision, fatigue and memory. Fear of leaving home, language problems, financial costs and lack of time due to child care, elder care or pursuing other hobbies are other possible situational barriers. Transport, health problems and adequate information in education constituted other problems.

And finally, **institutional barriers**, that is the various organisational practices and procedures which discourage adults from participation in adult education. Such a barrier can be divided into two major aspects, (a) organisational and (b) pedagogical barriers. The former consisted of the centres’ physical environment, the social environment, flexibility of provision, location, financial cost, lack of publicity about opportunity, and finally, lack of awareness of what is happening. On the other hand, pedagogical barriers may include such aspects as meaningfulness of subjects offered, socio-cultural barriers – such as different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, teaching skills, and “difficulties” due to mixed abilities in a learning group.

At this point, I would like to point out that when I say that we have a duty to increase participation of third agers in university programmes, I am not just referring to mere attendance, non-attendance or drop-out rates. In addition to “presence”, participation also pertains to “control” and “involvement” in the educational field. Participation as “involvement” identifies the extent to which a potential learner is in interaction with or is actively engaged with important elements of or processes in the adult educational event. On the other hand, participation as “control” identifies the extent to which individuals or groups are acting to control the learning environment.

The Declaration’s second and third goals are interrelated. They consist in *establishing a system based on two main cycles that articulate higher education programmes at undergraduate and graduate levels, and subsequently, the implementation of a second cycle requiring the completion of a first.* . I acknowledge that these aims have the clear advantage of highlighting which programmes lead to which lead to which degree so as to accommodate a diversity of individual and academic interests, as well as putting academic careers in a rational perspective.

However, on the other hand, I feel that many third agers would find this too rigid for them. If you permit me I would like to recount two local examples from Malta to illustrate better what I am referring to. First, a few years back, our only U3A divided some courses into two hierarchical tiers, stipulating that no course cannot be taken by those who had not previously enrolled in that same course in a preceding tier. This simply did not go well with the members. The setting of a pre-requisite cycle proved to be too instrumental and bureaucratic for many third agers, and a substantial number dropped out of the educational experience. One third ager expressed his anger to me on the phone, emphasising that third agers enrol in educational ventures to go *beyond* social and personal boundaries and not to be *constrained* by them. Assuming she is more right than wrong, but at the same time acknowledging that educational ventures cannot proceed without some form of confining cycles, I am of the opinion that the Declaration's second and third goals have to be discussed further before being implemented in third age university education.

The second example relates to the efforts of the European Centre of Gerontology to provide postgraduate training in gerontology. Since many degree courses were founded in the early 1990s, a strict adherence to university rules would mean that very few older adults who can qualify for this postgraduate diploma as their extensive knowledge and diplomas are not equal to an undergraduate degree. In this respect, the University has added a clause whereby diplomas read during times when no university degree was available for that particular subject are to be considered as degrees. This clause is only present in the statute of our Centre only and does not apply to other Faculties, Institutes or Centres. Thanks to such a legislation we have had older persons following the Postgraduate Course in our eleven year old history.

The fourth goal consist *in fostering a cycle that is relevant to the labour market*. The inconsistency of this aim *via-à-vis* the needs and interests of a large majority of third agers is, I believe, quite self-evident. Of course there are many older persons who are still interested – for various reasons – in re-entering the labour market following retirement. Others may even be highly motivated to re-entering the labour market in a novel role. However, many are not at all interested in paid employment. Indeed, many third agers would have waited in great anticipation for their retirement years. Consequently, we must make sure that the Declaration also gives high priority to expressive educational concerns which may be far from utilitarian in a post-industrial market economy. We must never find ourselves in a situation where only instrumental courses of learning are given the green light or founded by funding agencies.

As Alexandra Withnall and Keith Percy (1996) affirm in their groundbreaking publication *Good Practice in the Education and Training of Older Adults*, education and training for older adults must embody a philosophy of lifelong learning culture. The latter is centred around a much wider vision that the “lifelong learning” concept which underpins the official framework of education and training for adults. This is because the latter are marked by a market-led vocationalism, which is surely not the only case in the later life. However, and here I follow my colleague and mentor, Kenneth Wain (1993), one also needs to point out that the relationship between “lifelong learning” and “lifelong education” is still complex and lacks a clear conceptualisation. The way in which these two concepts should be interrelated are far from being apparent at this moment in time, and hence, this means that we are still unclear about the compatibility of “lifelong learning” with other social and political philosophies, as well as its potential contribution to educational theory and research methodologies (Withnall and Percy, 1996)

A system of accumulation and transfer of credits is the Declaration's fifth goal. This smacks unabashedly of what is generally referred to as the "pervasiveness of schooling" since it denotes a top-down model of instruction which cultivates respect for authority, experts, and universal knowledge. There should be programmes that take the form of a corporation of persons devoted to a particular activity, as the medieval interpretation of the term "university" implies, and be co-ordinated in a highly flexible ways and traits opposite to those found in traditional education. Not all older adults wish for rigid full-time attendance. Indeed, third agers may find it hard to take-up full time education because of other interests, commitment, or even physical problems.

In this respect I believe that the range of part-time educational pursuits for older adults should be at the forefront of university programmes for third agers. These should preferably be in the form of broad repertoires ranging from short but intensive encounters and prolonged extensive activities. Here, we must make an extra effort so that third age university programmes escape the "pervasiveness of schooling" which is also found at the heart of adult education programmes. In other words, programmes should not consist of a top-down model of instruction which cultivates respect for authority, experts, and universal knowledge. In this context, reference has been made, time and time again, to the excellent illustrative material by Paul Willis' (1978) *Learning to Labour*. Although it does not focus on older learners it is easy to see how his insights will even be replicated in a third age scenario.

At the same time, third age university programmes must be conceived within the more progressive section of the educational literature, and consequently, venture beyond both schooling and its paradigmatic cast. This is possible if we apply Ivan Illich's (1978) advice regarding different alternatives to traditional schooling which function to deschool society without abandoning the quest of learning. My reading of Illich's manifesto means that the deschooling of third age programmes embodies three principles. First, that third age education does not have to be age specific. Secondly, that third age programmes are not be teacher-centred but based on –in Paolo Freire's (1972) words – a "teachers-students partnership". And third, in the spirit of flexibility and immediacy, they must spare those who partake of it the necessity to submit to an obligatory curriculum. This is because all curricula are generally contestable and negotiable, informally if not formally.

The sixth and final goal refers to the *mobility of students, teachers, researchers, etc.* From a gerontological point of view this is undoubtedly the goal which holds the greatest potential for older persons. Third agers are very interested, and I would say, adventurous in the educational quest. Indeed, that is my many third agers join an educational institution – to get a new lease of life. However, what about subaltern older persons, who due to more advancing age, lower class standing, or sheer ill luck have a low health and financial status are not so mobile. Indeed, as Rick Swindell (2000) points out, a range of health-related factors prevents many older people from enjoy and benefiting from adult education activities. Apart from direct health related constraints however, there are other age-related factors that jeopardise social networks. For example, many older people give up driving and become isolated from activities because public transport is not readily available, or is difficult to use. Others, particularly women, may be thrust into the role of caregivers for ailing spouses or friends, or for grandchildren whose parents must work.

Therefore, whilst we should promote the notion of human mobility, we must not forget that older persons are a heterogeneous group of persons with diverse amounts of social, economic, cultural, and physical capital. Tackling such an issue, in Australia, there exists a programme called *Isolated Bytes* constituting of an experimental "U3A without walls" that

utilises the Internet to provide cognitively challenging adult education programmes to isolated people. The programme proved to be successful, thus suggesting that well-crafted adult education programmes delivered by the Internet have the potential to enrich the lives of isolated older people. Although the sample was small, the overall evaluation showed that participants benefited from the venture and most of them enjoyed interacting with like-minded strangers, via cyberspace. One participant even wrote: "many thanks to [this programmes] I have been able to enjoy what has turned out to be the most pleasurable weeks of my life" (Swindell, 1992, p.260). This shows that despite its weaknesses of having to address a huge and heterogeneous audience, distance education has the potential to play a major role in housebound senior adults' productivity, entertainment, socialisation, daily functions, and not least, emancipation. In this respect, I firmly believe that in later life we have to expand our notion of mobility to include also non-spatial mobility but which, nevertheless, still promotes an improvement of the learner's quality of life.

GOOD PRACTICE IN THIRD AGE UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES

Here, I believe, we have to pause, take stock of what has been said, and focus on the other major question: What ought to be done? In replying to my own question I have formulated six principles which I believe are fundamental concepts in the setting and running of third age university programmes.

First, *implementing policy and funding measures* which are sensitive to a third age setting. Drawing on a number of small scale investigations with a range of respondents involved in the fields of education and older people, Shuller and Bostyn (1992) emphasize the need of educational gerontological policies. These included ensuring that every educational institution has an Older Learners Officer/Advisor, the elimination that every barriers preventing access to education and/or training, grants for study, as well the coordination and support of national campaigns to promote learning in later life. At the same time, we must engage in a consistent look out for funding that will enable us to found third age university programmes.

Secondly, *adequate and widespread information and guidance services*. Third age educators must disseminate information on available programmes that is comprehensive concise, and non-intimidating. If published, information should be written in a language that is simple, non-patronising, and devoid of jargon so as to attract the attention on subaltern groups. Preferably, leaflets should be of a pocket guide size, containing enlarged lettering, not printed on glossy paper, and in colour. Leaflets must be distributed in places where older persons generally frequent, such as churches, post offices, pharmacies, health clinics, day centres, and residential institutions. At the same time, it is also imperative that information is disseminated through as many times of communication networks as possible – ranging from television, radio, newspapers, to community and church announcements – as this increases the probability that information reaches various sectors of older persons.

Thirdly, *employing the combination of humanist and critical ideological frameworks in the learning process, rather than favouring over the other*. This principle emerged following a reading of an article Alexandra Withnall (2000) in which she argued that:

Psychological evidence concerning the impact of ageing on health status, intellectual skills and lifestyles... suggests a sharper division between the fit and the active majority and the minority suffering acute or chronic illness whether men-

tal physical or both. *But to assume a heterogeneity among older people, uniformly disadvantaged and committed to praxis is simply to impose a new kind of ideological constraint.*

Withnall, 2000, p.93

Honestly this article served me with an eye-opener in coming to terms that both humanist and critical styles have a central place in older adult education. A humanist position proposes an approach where increasing older learners' self-fulfillment and potential become the ultimate aim of older adult education. In advocating such an approach, Keith Percy (1990, p. 236) argues that this type of learning should take the form of a personal quest where "learners begin from where they are; they follow the thrust of their own curiosities in order to make what is around them more meaningful; ideally they should be free of external constraints so that they can continue until they are satisfied, until they have achieved a potential that is within them". Learning, therefore, takes the form of an "individual encounter" where the educator's role is to facilitate the process of learning for the older learners, and not necessarily persuade him/her into action.

However, as already hinted, although the liberal-humanist approach to third age education holds an enormous potential to bridge education and learning in later life, nevertheless, I also believe that third age university programmes have also to embody a critical rationale. This is because only certain minorities of older persons are free of constraints, of worries and of imposed responsibilities. For many, especially lower class elders and older women, retirement brings about increasing financial and caring concerns. Moreover, not all older persons feel a natural yearning to know more, explore and understand cultural/artistic phenomena, but only those possessing bourgeois dispositions. A critical rationale in third age university programmes would be premised on the need to aid older persons "gaining power over their lives... and, above all, it should be an important mechanism for individual and group empowerment" (Glendenning and Battersby, 1990, pp.220-1)

It is only so that such programmes will be able to act as a **social movement** that combats ageist misconceptions and policies, channelling a type of social change parallel to what the Danish High School Movement did for middle aged adults. However, this is only possible if programmes (i) develop an articulate critical understanding of the real social forces opposing and indifferent to older persons' interests, or an action plan containing practical steps that serve to confront such forces; (ii) incorporate a counter-hegemonical rationale through the presence of "organic intellectuals" so as to be able to confront the various forms of ageist discriminations through a leader who takes the role of a constructor, organiser, "permanent persuader", and not just a simple orator; and, finally, (iii) by seeking contact with subaltern older persons who are evidently more socially marginalized than others.

Fourthly, it is my opinion that third age university programmes need to go *beyond pedagogical and andragogical methods* – synonymous to that Paulo Freire (1972) deems as "banking education" – and embrace a critical gerogogical approach towards teaching and learning. Critical gerogogy contains many similarities with Freire's "liberatory education", and is defined as "a liberating and transforming notion which endorses principles of collectively and dialogue central to learning and teaching" (Battersby, 1987, p.7). Hence, gerogogy, "provides older persons with opportunities for a self-conscious critique of their life and experiences... that promote critical reflection and action" (Battersby and Glendenning, 1992, p.120). It assumes the status, not of an imposed set of prescriptive guidelines and strategies, but as a concept which conceptualises teaching and learning as a collective and negotiated en-

terprise amongst older adults. Therefore, as I have discussed elsewhere (Formosa, 2002), this means that university programmes for older persons should:

- Be directed by a political rationale that highlights its commitment to the transformation of ageist social structures.
- Incorporate a communal approach the transformation of the ageist world.
- Refuse the myth that any type of education empowers older persons.
- Not be confined within the walls of the older adult educational program but expand out to all distinct segments of older persons.
- Embrace a self-help culture towards a more decentralised and autonomous older adult education as a power is shifted to older learners; and finally.
- Enable learners to take the role of a “progressive” movement by engaging in counter-hegemonic activities.

Finally, programmes have *to take stock of the fact that great majority of older learners are women*. Whilst it is welcoming to note that over the past decade, social gerontologists have begun to apply feminist perspectives to comprehend better the lives of older women, it is lamentable to note that withist educational gerontology is devoid of a feminist discourse, at the same time feminist adult education is oblivious to older women. To set justice to such an imbalance, I believe that we must provide affirmative action towards older women and make sure that third age programmes.

- Are be directed by a rational that acknowledges older women as an oppressed population due to the “double standard of aging”.
- Acknowledge that the subaltern position of older women is also the result of life-long cumulative disadvantages.
- Reject that there is a universalised singular identity among women and emphasises a “politics of difference”.
- Abandon traditional strategies of learning and teaching and embrace a feminist praxis in both gerogogical and research activities; and finally.
- Drive towards the empowerment of older women in a distinct but collective effort.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS: A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

In conclusion, I must repeat that this document was not indented to be a didactic manual to be adopted in a non-critical fashion but should always be characterised by a critical flexibility. They have only been presented as a cluster of themes inspired by humanist and emancipatory intents in my quest to raise awareness on third age university programmes.

Without doubt, we need more research on the area of older adult education. Unfortunately, not many students, research fellows, and non-governmental agencies choose tackle seriously the interrelation between life and educational provision. Despite this, however, I believe that there is light at the end of the tunnel if we focus our energies on three basic issues. *First*, increasing the number of third age university programmes. *Secondly*, working to increase the number of third agers enrolled in university programmes. And, *finally*, coordinating styles of educational programmes that are attuned to the way in which third agers classify and comprehend education and learning, the value that they put on the latter two concepts, and the distinct ways in which third agers learn and educate themselves

Following in the footsteps of Sheila Carlton and Jim Soulsby (1999), I believe that this is possible if university programmes for the third age

- Review their premises, facilities, outreach and publicity, to ensure that they are use friendly to older people.
- Reassess their curricula, so as to extend it to the needs of older learners.
- Render accreditation more user-friendly for third agers by recording individual achievements, as well as by implementing a more flexible progression so that both the needs of instrumental and expressive older learners are met.
- Plan provision and target funding to increase the numbers of older learners, especially with respect to those with little or no educational experience.
- Fund research and learning issues to third agers, and consequently, disseminate the outcomes of projects which can provide models of good practice for third age university education.
- Establish and maintain quality assurance of provision appropriate to older learners, and finally.

Look out for partnerships whit other education provides, and voluntary agencies concerned with older people and their learning, so as to build innovate and effective ways of encouraging older learners to join in.

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