Modelling the impact of lifelong learning on senior citizens’ quality of life

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Abstract

This article focuses on lifelong learning organisations that currently offer courses and activities for senior citizens (people over 55 years old or retired). The main aims of these organisations are usually to improve the skills and knowledge of the learners in subjects like information and communication technologies, economics, history, arts, health, etc. In a broad sense the aims of these institutions are to help seniors integrate in today’s society, to socialize and raise their well being and quality of life. The concept of “quality of life” is a commonly used term that needs clarification. This article first offers an analysis to model the impact of education on quality of life and then identifies the best quality of life indicators that can be used to evaluate any educational program. An analysis of current publications, study cases and qualitative research was carried out in the Senior Citizens’ University (Universitat Jaume I, Castellon, Spain).

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1. Introduction

Education should be available to all individuals regardless of their age. In a society that promotes lifelong learning, all age spectrums must be given the opportunity to continue learning. This article focuses on senior learners (over 55 years old, but usually retired and older than 65). This group of learners is not motivated to continue learning by ambitions of job promotion or improved qualifications. Their interest lies in learning to know more and to continue improving as individuals; individuals who should be included in today’s changing society. Educational institutions attempt to achieve targets such as increasing seniors’ skills and general knowledge (economics, art, history, ICT, etc), but they also encourage them to remain active (voluntarily and through intergenerational activities) by creating an environment that allows the fluent exchange of knowledge and increases their competences as citizens (capable of discussing, defending their rights, taking on an active role in other areas, etc.). The final aim of educational institutions is to increase senior citizens’ well-being, integration and quality of life.

Quality of life is a very broad and ambiguous concept. It is an easy concept to use on any motivational flyer and when trying to convince decision makers about the great advantages of lifelong learning, but it has become very difficult to demonstrate what it is. The project “Evaluation toolkit on senior education to improve their quality of

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life” (http://www.edusenior.eu) financed by the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning programme will develop a tool to enable institutions to evaluate the impact of education on quality of life and also offer recommendations to improve the quality of the institutions themselves.

Before this toolkit can be developed, clarification is needed on how the available quality of life indicators can be applied to seniors’ education and the impact that education has on their lives. These indicators must be identified as either potentially useful or rejected because of their low impact.

2. Evaluation of Quality of Life

The work of Rapley (2003) provides extensive analysis of the Quality of Life (QOL) concept. He firstly recognizes the complexity of the term and highlights the difficulty of reaching a general consensus on the definition. QOL is a complex state that can be observed at group, community or individual levels. At an individual level, Rapley notes that QOL can be conceived as “an aspect of individual subjectivity, a psychological quantum expressing the satisfaction of particular people with their individual lives”. Definitions of QOL based on health or disease are plentiful, but they are too varied and too specific. As the QOL concept is subjective, certain cultural components further complicate its definition, since cultural, social and environmental contexts and local values come into play. Given the difficulties in finding a precise definition, we must start with the most accepted theories, such as those offered by the WHO (WHOQOL 1997), Cummings (Cummins 1997) and Schalock (2004).

The WHOQOL justifies the dimension and facets chosen to evaluate the QOL based on some of people’s individual aspects. These aspects are explained in the Manual of WHOQOL (WHOQOL 1998); some of the facets are detailed in Table 1, together with other theories from Cummins (1997b) and Schalock (2004).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Facet</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHOQOL</td>
<td>Energy and fatigue</td>
<td>A person’s energy, enthusiasm and endurance to perform the necessary tasks of daily living, as well as other chosen activities such as recreation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHOQOL</td>
<td>Positive feelings</td>
<td>How much a person experiences positive feelings of contentment, balance, peace, happiness, hopefulness, joy and enjoyment of the good things in life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHOQOL</td>
<td>Thinking, learning, memory and concentration</td>
<td>A person’s view of his/her thinking, learning, memory, concentration and ability to make decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHOQOL</td>
<td>Body image and appearance</td>
<td>A person’s view of his/her body. The focus is on the person’s satisfaction with the way he/she looks and the effect it has on his/her self-concept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHOQOL</td>
<td>Negative feelings</td>
<td>How much a person experiences negative feelings, including despondency, guilt, sadness, tearfulness, despair, nervousness, anxiety and a lack of pleasure in life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHOQOL</td>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>How much a person feels the commitment, approval, and availability of practical assistance from family and friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHOQOL</td>
<td>Opportunities for acquiring new information and skills</td>
<td>A person’s opportunity and desire to learn new skills, acquire new knowledge, and feel in touch with what is going on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cummins</td>
<td>Community well-being</td>
<td>Material well-being, living conditions, access to services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cummins</td>
<td>Emotional well-being</td>
<td>Community integration and participation. Community roles (contributor, volunteer). Social support (support network, services).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schalock</td>
<td>Social inclusion</td>
<td>Inter-personal relations (social networks, social contacts). Relationships (family, friends, peers). Supports (emotional, physical, financial, feedback).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schalock</td>
<td>Inter-personal relations</td>
<td>Personal development.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Selected aspects considered in individual QOL
3. Senior citizens’ education

The Senior Citizens’ University (SCU) is an adult education project at the Jaume I University of Castellón in Spain. The concept of including senior citizens in university communities was first proposed in 1986 by Lemieux and Vellas. Today, 57 Spanish universities (80 per cent) (Cabedo 2006), run such a project and over 30,000 students are enrolled on their courses. These learners are aged 55 and over, and their main motivations are interest in the subjects taught, keeping up to date, curiosity and keeping their minds active. The university provides a social, academic and research framework. These qualities are what clearly differentiate the senior citizens’ university programmes in Spain from other adult learning institutions. The first Spanish programme began in 1992 in the University of Alcalá de Henares. The SCU at the Jaume I University was founded in 1998 with 38 learners. ICT courses were offered for the first time in 2002. In the last academic year (2010–2011), 919 students, with an average age of 66, registered for SCU courses. The aims of the SCU are to:

- Foster greater participation of senior citizens in today’s society.
- Contribute to the process of adaptation to change that senior citizens face today.
- Provide an appropriate space for the interchange of knowledge and experiences of a scientific and cultural nature.
- Evaluate, recognize and build upon the experiences senior citizens have acquired throughout their professional and working lives.
- Provide a forum for seeking solutions that encourage successful intergenerational relationships.
- Enable senior citizens to become aware of aspects of university life that, among other positive outcomes, may contribute to a better quality of life.

The formal learning programme the university offers allows for very clear learning objectives and competences that can be achieved through a curriculum throughout the academic year. The subjects taught are essentially from the humanities such as art, history and psychology, but also include other subjects like economics and health, and extra-academic activities (drama, hiking, choir, a magazine, radio programme, etc.). The teachers are all university professors, and all courses are tailored-made for seniors (Alkharusi, 2010).

This formal structure has significant advantages. It enables an environment that provides a framework for formal classroom teaching, but also encourages a broader form of education, promoting tolerance, integration, respect, socialising, and so on. The SCU teaching staff and facilitators are essential figures in this process, and they all participate actively in the learners’ education throughout the academic year. Furthermore, the learners’ progress can be monitored, corrective measures taken and evaluation carried out.

We now outline some aspects that should be taken into account when considering seniors’ education and that could impact on their quality of life.

3.1. Learning content

The SCU offers courses in the areas of history, arts, sociology, economics, technology, etc., but content is carefully chosen based on the following aims:

- Courses must take into account the final target and other aspects such as demographic, biological and social issues related to senior learners.
- Courses should provide a better understanding of the context in which learners live; local history, what is happening today in the economy or in the changing roles of the society.
- The understanding provided by the teaching is aimed to produce an impact: discovering, acting, recognizing changes, etc.
3.2. Environment

Formal institutions and formal teaching commit learners to a learning path of compulsory and elective subjects. At times, this may be considered inconvenient, but it offers great advantages to both learners and institutions. Learners follow a well-established path, designed specifically to give them comprehensive knowledge and skills. On a longer teaching program, a close group environment, trust and intimacy can be built up.

Informal courses, workshops, and extra-academic activities also have notable advantages since they allow specific aims to be addressed, based not only on subjects, content or technological skills, but on other social skills.

3.3. Pedagogy

Several methodologies can be applied in teaching senior learners: instructional, constructivist, cognitive, etc., together with many tools such as theoretical lectures, workshops, debates, etc. Below, we take into account some aspects and potentialities:
- Senior learners have a great deal of age-based experience that can be advantageously applied in debates or discussions.
- Learning should be encouraged so it takes place outside the classrooms; with friends and families, when reading a magazine or watching news on television.
- Discussion, debates and learner participation can promote learning not only in the subject taught in the classroom, but also in other skills such as communication.

3.4. Facilitators

Tutors and facilitators have a major role in activating group dynamics. As a rule, teachers only follow learners’ progress during one subject or specific course, which usually takes place on certain days. On the other hand, tutors maintain contact with learners throughout the entire academic course. In any event, teachers must be aware of specific pedagogy that is suitable for senior learners, their specific aims and requirements.

3.5. Active learning

Senior learners should consider themselves as main actors of their own learning. They attend classes because they want to, not because their work obligations required them to or to get a degree. They are therefore the first to be interested in receiving high quality education and sometimes their involvement goes beyond the walls of the classrooms. In the SCU the active participation of learners is achieved with the following measures:
- Participating on the SCU’s decision-making board
- Collaborating in and organizing extra-academic activities
- Participating in national and European projects, such as Grundtvig Learning Partnerships
- Researching and publishing their work using web tools (wikis and blogs, as http://www.wikisenior.es)

4. Modelling proposal

The SCU offers education as explained in the previous section to maximize the impact of culture, knowledge, social skills, activity and well-being on senior citizens. From this starting point, we now attempt to detail which of those educational factors can affect well-being and quality of life.

It is not easy to correlate increased general knowledge with people’s quality of life, but several factors are encouraged by education and impact facets of quality of life:
4.1. Satisfy their curiosity and opportunity to acquire new skills

Education can satisfy senior learners’ needs and offer learning paths to acquire new skills that they may wish to pursue. Lifelong learning is a right for all individuals, and older people should not be denied that right.

4.2. Being part of a group

Education can be offered as a way of improving personal and social skills. Being part of a group implies the need to socialize, discuss and defend one’s own rights. Learning environments and tools can be applied to encourage people to work in groups, collaborate, express themselves, reach agreements and decisions based on a solid foundation, communicate ideas and combat intolerance.

4.3. Integration of senior citizens in an ever changing society

Citizens who do not understand the political, economic, social and technological changes happening around the world, both locally and globally, face social exclusion, which can be avoided by keeping up to date in today’s society. These factors impact communities and individuals. Seniors can only become integrated if they have an understanding of what is happening and citizens’ new roles.

4.4. Changes in individuals

It is important to understand and know oneself at any stage of life. Regardless of its cause, whether biological, domestic, economic, etc., any change must be assimilated and accepted or modified when possible. Educational institutions have a duty to promote this understanding, but they can also help promote a positive attitude.

4.5. Active participation in society

The experience of senior learners must be retained and society can put their active participation to good use. Formally, learners can study at home to increase their knowledge, but also at an informal level, workshops and other activities can be planned to allow their active participation in intergenerational or voluntarily activities.

Figure 1. Process for revealing the relationship between Quality of Life and Education
5. Research

Much has been written about the benefits of formal learning for senior citizens, but these benefits are not frequently associated with social impact and well-being as well as academic achievement.

During the 2010/2011 academic year, 72 open interviews were undertaken with senior learners with the following aims:

- To discover the social, family, and physical characteristics of learners attending the Senior Citizens’ University educational program.
- To discover levels of learners’ satisfaction with the institution, trainers and subjects
- To identify possible benefits that education can have.

These open interviews were based on senior learners’ life history, which enabled us to see the time line of their life course, of exterior events and of their own decisions. It also revealed their values and motivations and enabled us to verify whether education had had an impact on their lives.

16 women and 8 men were randomly chosen from each course (3 courses). The ratio of women to men reflects the proportion of all students enrolled in the SCU. Of those interviewed, 44 reported having some kind of family responsibilities, such as caring for relatives (parents, grandchildren or spouses). For 29 of them, attending the Senior Citizens’ University represented a release from their duties.

In the main, the learners enjoyed good health, although 14% reported a relatively significant health problem. To one degree or another, learners noted feeling better physically once they had been attending classes for a while, even though they knew that their health problems had not disappeared. In 4 cases (3 women and 1 man), learners said that they were no longer taking anti-depressants since they had enrolled at the SCU.

The majority, 62%, stated that they had enrolled at the SCU because a colleague, relative or friend had talked to them about it. The remaining 38% had been motivated to enrol by their own interests, publicity campaigns or attending information sessions. Reasons for enrolling included academic advancement (72%), or social reasons (28%) such as meeting people with similar interests, getting out of the house, or filling their free time.

Without exception, learners positively evaluated the courses offered in the Senior Citizens University; only a few remarks were made with reference to certain subjects. They were appreciative of the range of courses offered, the fact that there were no exams and that the motivation to attend was essentially a desire to learn.

6. Impact

People are social beings, and as such they need to share activities with the other people around them. At any age, isolation can cause undesirable negative impact: irrational thoughts, disturbed behaviour, etc. When individuals get older, this behaviour may increase as a result of events in their lives that can bring about this isolation: the death of relatives, children becoming independent, friends who move away, etc. Other life events can cause radical changes in their behaviour: taking care of an ill relative, their own illnesses, low life expectancy, etc.

Undertaking educational tasks and activities was seen by some learners as way of staying young, as learning was interpreted as something that adolescents did for their future. Taking advantage of their time to learn was highly valued from two points of view: firstly as a way of spending time usefully (not wasting time watching TV or as a reason to get out of bed), and secondly as a way of increasing their curiosity.
We now propose the following dimensions that could be considered when modelling the impact of an education intervention on quality of life.

6.1. Space for reflection

Learners see the Senior Citizens’ University as a space designed for learning, reflection and debate. Teachers do not reject any opinion and all aspects are valued. Seniors appreciate the mutual respect between learners and teachers. The interviews revealed that in some cases, learners considered that their opinions were not always valued at home, but through the classes their self-confidence had grown, they discovered new knowledge about what is happening in today’s society and increased their capacity to defend their opinions, while remaining aware of new points of view and discussion.

One interviewee illustrated this point: “When I heard my husband and son talking about globalisation, I switched off the cooker and I explained what globalisation was”

6.2. Enjoyment

The pleasure derived from learning new things and taking part in or starting new activities with other learners was highlighted in the interviews. This sometimes appeared as a way of doing an activity they had not previously had time for because of other duties, or in other cases it emerged as a way to focus on themselves:

“I always liked learning, mostly history and the arts. Up to now, I was working as a manager and I had no time. Now I can do new things”. “The only thing I did was cook, iron, clean, take care of the grandchildren... now it is perfect; this change has given me some time for myself”

6.3. Facing up to daily reality

Coming together in this special space offered by the University enables senior learners to cope with their daily reality (problems, challenges, etc.). Being around people with similar problems helps them face their own challenges, find solutions or simply put on a brave face.

“My son was going through a divorce; I was worried about what he would do. What would happen? I knew a classmate who had been through the same experience and that made me feel much calmer”. “I have problems with my eye. I had to have surgery. Surgery had always worried me; I was even thinking I would go blind. I was exaggerating; my illness was really quite trivial.”

6.4. Doing new activities

Learners particularly valued the educational activities outside the formal classes. They do not regard these activities as tourist trips but as new experiences that they can take full advantage of. The SCU offers the context in which to undertake activities like drama, creating a web page or magazine, hiking, participating on the radio, etc. The University provides an umbrella for all these activities. The learners see these activities as having a direct impact on their individual well-being (such as hiking) or on society through the dissemination of ideas (radio, magazine) or through fund-raising activities for charity (putting on a play). Very few senior learners do not participate in one of these extra-academic activities.
7. Conclusion

The learners' experiences have clearly shown that education has a very positive influence on individuals’ lives. Participation in a formal education program like the SCU involves more than simply attending classes; its main aim is not only to learn from the courses, but also to develop personally and intellectually, share experiences, exchange with others and learn to see the world from other points of view.

The qualitative research affirms that education affects quality of life, and this relationship can be considered in the facets presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Facets of quality of life impacted by education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facet</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical and psychological well-being</td>
<td>Feeling healthier or giving appropriate relevance to problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal interrelationship</td>
<td>Capacity to deal with other people, sharing, collaborating and exchanging. Feeling comfortable and having the capacity to discuss and defend one’s own opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude to daily reality</td>
<td>A more relaxed, open and tolerant attitude to one’s own daily reality. Increased capacity to deal with it or overcome problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual energy</td>
<td>To learn new things, participate actively, be creative and participative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a follow-up to this introductory research, further study should consider how to obtain the competences needed to increase levels of quality of life through education. The most appropriate methodologies, tools, content, etc., for attaining these competences should also be identified through analysis.

Acknowledgements

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