

Prethodno priopćenje

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING IN CREATING AN AGE- FRIENDLY FACULTY

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### Abstract

The Faculty of Social Work develops educational programmes for older people via intergenerational networking and is part of the so-called Faculty of Active Wisdom, the network of alumni clubs for retired people and/or people older than 55 years at the University of Ljubljana. Education takes place as part of the Age-friendly University movement. With this activity, we strive to reinforce educational opportunities for older people, promote research on ageing and old age, as well as intergenerational networking, raise further public awareness about ageing and old age, shape study programmes, and promote inclusion and networking in later life. The goals of the Faculty of Active Wisdom include developing the university so that it will be based on creating connections between older people, graduates, and students to strengthen knowledge about ageing and old age. In pursuit of these goals, the Faculty of Social Work is developing new educational programmes that enable the transfer of knowledge and collaboration between generations. A 20-hour educational programme entitled “Life Stories in the Embrace of Memories” takes place in intergenerational pairs of one older and one younger student. The authors of this article, as the middle-aged generation, coordinate the intergenerational educational programme and take care of its positive outcomes. The results of the education presented in this article are based on the analysis of a survey questionnaire filled out by six older participants, as well as the written essays of nine students of social work who were included in the educational programme. The first year of education shows good results on three levels: (1) it promotes intergenerational learning and education for the sharing of expertise between students of different ages; (2) it enables personal and professional development in the second half of life; and (3) it increases the knowledge of ageing, old age and active old age and contributes to the prevention of ageism.

**Keywords:** *age-friendly university; destigmatisation of old age; good quality of old age; intergenerational education.*

## Introduction

The changes in society, which include demographic changes, the ageing of the population, prolonged life expectancy and care for creative and active ageing, pose new challenges to educational policies, higher education institutions and existing educational programmes. Among other things, the COVID-19 epidemic has also revealed that despite the increasing number of older people, old age is still regarded very negatively. While the position of older people is still highly vulnerable and they are considered to be a social group that needs to be protected in every possible way (e.g., against Coronavirus), at the same time, it seems as if, as a society, we are striving hard to suppress their voice and ignore their needs (Mali and Grebenc, 2021). This is why diverse movements engaging in the empowerment of older people and their social inclusion and participation are extremely important. One of them is the age-friendly university movement that Ljubljana University has joined. This article shows how, in the 2023/24 academic year, the Faculty of Social Work, a member of the University of Ljubljana, carried out the educational programme on the basis of intergenerational learning and dialogue, enabling personal and professional development in old age and contributing to the prevention and elimination of prejudice and negative viewpoints towards ageing and old age.

Changes in higher education to include older people in education are traditionally interesting for social work because they enable the realisation and presentation of the user and participatory perspective that social work is based on. The first evaluation of the intergenerational learning programme shows highly positive outcomes, with the students of the younger generation strengthening their action knowledge for social work with older people, and the students of the older generation strengthening their social power and social inclusion.

## The Definition of Ageing in Modern Society and Changes in the Understanding of Ageing and Old Age

Shifting age demographics not only change health care and social and pension policies but are also reflected in education. Recently, interest of the ageing population has increased they accept old age as an opportunity to acquire new life experiences, with knowledge and education occupying important places. Montepare et al. (2020, p. 274) report an increased interest in higher education among people over 50 years of age in the US. Their motivation for education lies mainly in looking for possibilities for personal development, which suggests that the new-age generations tend to look for opportunities to ensure good-quality of ageing while maintaining physical and psychosocial strength in old age.

The ageing of the population, longer life expectancy, and increasing number of older people in society also do not automatically mean a positive opinion of old age. This was pointed out as early as the 1960s by Butler (Bytheway, 2005) who developed the concept of *ageism*, which defines the process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination of people only because they are old. In modern society older people are often characterised as forgetful, rigid, conservative, less capable, etc. Many international and national documents from different countries aim to change the image of ageing and old age because the ageing of the population remains an incontestable fact for all nations, which is why we need to create social conditions in which older people occupy an important position.

The negative image of old age also entails the reduced role of older people in society, the lack of recognition of their human rights and poorer quality of life. An antidote to these negativisms is the emerging idea of creating communities where older people are respected, their specific needs understood and communities that will be accommodating, kind to and accepting of old age rather than ignoring it or considering it a period of life to fear, or which is unwanted. An age-friendly society is a society whose members live a full and meaningful life throughout their old age (Scharlach and Lehning, 2016, p. 15). These societies specifically emphasise the assurance of services enabling the healthy ageing of all residents, particularly their social participation. In the context of age-friendly cities, cities are expected to be particularly attentive to the specific health-related needs of older people, which can differ from those of other age groups. Rather than excluding residents of other age groups, age-friendly societies typically devote special attention to the needs of older people.

Many factors influence different forms of social participation in old age. Older people are more socially active near their homes, and in the neighbourhood in which they live, they are more connected to their neighbours and less connected to people who do not live in their vicinity; they are more dependent on the social contacts they make in their immediate community. This also depends on their mobility. Strong social ties in the neighbourhood are extremely important for preventing social isolation and ensuring well-being in old age (Scharlach and Lehning, 2016, p. 69).

People truly appreciate personal contact and direct companionship, where they can see, feel and touch another person. While on the telephone, contact is different and, above all, short-term; however, it still often breaks a period of long-term exclusion from the community and persistent loneliness. Distance assistance has certain advantages that have proven important, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Owing to limited social contact, a telephone call and the establishment of a videoconference were the only opportunities for many older people to contact others. Problems arise when older people do not know how to use new communication tools (mobile telephones, tablets, and videoconference programmes), and when we struggle to teach them to use new technology in these new circumstances.

Adapting life to ageing and ageing to life is one of the guiding principles ensuring good, positively oriented ageing - *ageing well*. Such a view of ageing represents a step away from the established belief that older people do not like change or even that they are unwilling to grapple with it. It is also the guiding principle to ensure social participation, because without understanding ageing as a process of adjustment to change, we fail to appreciate and understand the meaning of the participative role of older people. Certainly, education must join these changes by, on the one hand, enabling older people to acquire their desired education and, on the other hand, educating younger and middle-aged generations about the process of ageing and old age in modern society. Therefore, the educational system at various levels of education faces great challenges, as education, in general, is still considered the right of children and young people, which is why the forms and ways of obtaining education are largely adapted to their needs (Ličen, 2023). Higher education is no exception; therefore, it faces the sizeable challenge of how to adjust the educational space to the needs and ideas of older people and shape it intergenerationally (Montepare et al., 2020).

## Age-friendly University Movement

The Age-friendly University movement emerged following the model of the aforementioned age-friendly communities. The development of the movement was influenced by several factors ranging from understanding ageing as a period of new development, active wisdom, and perspectives of old age as a process or trajectory, which characteristically also involves gaining rather than losing, to obtaining different research results and projects that influence the making of different policies, which promote age-friendly ways and forms of life (Ličen, 2023). The movement made a breakthrough in 2012, named the European Year of Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity by the European Parliament, placing the ageing of the population and the related social change in the spotlight. In the same year, Dublin City University started the initiative, which called upon universities across the world to respond to the needs of an ageing society and, in turn, proposed that universities at the global level comply with the so-called 10 principles of an Age-friendly University (Age-friendly University, Global Network, 2024). These principles are based on six pillars of university activities: teaching and learning, research and innovation, lifelong learning, intergenerational learning, learning to develop or continue a career, and social engagement (Montepare, 2019; Talmage et al., 2016). On the basis of these principles, universities are encouraged to start introducing changes that will enable older people to achieve knowledge at higher levels of education, continue or begin a new career, promote the development of a culture of positive and active old age, and inform younger generations about this culture (Montepare et al., 2020). Universities are also encouraged to become more age-inclusive and enable the development of new models of work that will allow them to follow the demands of ageing generations and mixed-age groups of students (Montepare and Brown, 2022). Age-friendly universities support research on ageing and old age and develop educational programmes based on older adults' experience and needs. The networking of universities to make a global age-friendly university movement enhances the development of new partnerships. According to the data of the movement (Age-friendly University, 2024), 110 universities on five continents, including Europe, North and South America, Asia and Oceania, currently join the movement.

Ljubljana University is one of two universities in Slovenia that are developing age-friendly university programmes. It is the central and largest educational and research institution in the country. In the 2023/24 academic year, 37,400 students were enrolled in the study programmes of its 26 member faculties and three art academies (University of Ljubljana, 2024). The Faculty of Social Work is one of the university's members, and its basic tasks are education and research. In its undergraduate and postgraduate studies and professional training programmes (lifelong learning), it educates and trains students to conduct professional tasks and services in social protection, employment, and other areas, where social work knowledge and skills are needed or useful (Faculty of Social Work, 2024). The Faculty is distinctive in that it is one of the few university members that develop study programmes including subjects that offer diverse content related to ageing and old age.

Milošević Arnold (1999, p. 16) stated that ever since the 1970s, ageing-related issues have been part of education for social work in Slovenia. While developing specialised knowledge in organisation, mental health, psychosocial help, community care and work with young people in the 1990s, Social Work with Older People was only introduced by the Faculty with the new Bologna reform of the study programmes and has been taught in an extended format since 2010 (Mali, 2013).

In addition to Social Work with Older People as a compulsory subject, the Bologna-reformed Social Work study programme at the undergraduate level also offers a specialised study programme because the Social Work with Older People module is one of the six elective modules at the Faculty. The module includes the following subjects: Help for the Dying and Their Relatives, Social Networks, Individual Planning of Long-term Care and Social Work with People with Dementia (a total of 25 ECTS subjects covering the topic of social work with older people). In all four years, the students also had practical training in this area.

At the postgraduate level, the study of Social Work with Older People was introduced for the first time in the history of education for social work (Mali, 2015). Since 2017, the programme has been carried out as part-time study and includes 60 ECTS. The second-cycle full-time study within the Social Work study programme also includes the Long-term Care of Older People module, which comprises the following subjects: Long-Term Care and Social Work, Care Regimes and Support Networks, and the Social Work Model of Understanding Dementia (upon enrolment in the second-cycle study and the election of the Long-term Care of Older People module, students acquire 60 ECTS). Some of these subjects are also offered annually for foreign (Erasmus) students.

By introducing specialised knowledge in the Social Work curriculum, we wish to encourage students to undertake more in-depth and independent studies of social work with older people. This includes training them in specialised social work with older adults in the community and in institutions for older people as well as for counselling work in preparation for old age for the generations approaching their older years (Mali, 2015). This study programme enables students to acquire knowledge and understanding of modern theoretical concepts and practices in social work with older people, as well as their application in concrete practical work. Graduates of the postgraduate programme are trained to recognise, analyse and find practical solutions and develop innovative approaches to solving older people's distress in a social-work-specific way.

Until the 2023/24 academic year, this content was offered only to students of the younger and middle-aged generations. Presently, we also offer two subjects for people with retirement status. The following section presents the contents and study programme of one of them.

### **The Faculty of Active Wisdom Programme as an Example of the Implementation of the Age-friendly University Movement at the Faculty of Social Work**

The Faculty of Social Work develops education for older adults that is based on intergenerational networking and is part of the so-called Faculty of Active Wisdom, the network of alumni clubs for retired people and/or adults older than 55 years at the University of Ljubljana. Education takes place as part of the movement, which, in the international environment, is known as an age-friendly university. This activity aims to strengthen education opportunities for older adults, promote research on age and ageing, enhance intergenerational networking, increase public awareness about ageing and old age, create a study, and promote inclusion and networking for people later in life. The Faculty of Active Wisdom aims to develop a university that is based on networking between older people, graduates and students to strengthen our knowledge of ageing and old age, and to enable different activities in old age to prevent the predominantly negative view of old age in society. Pursuing these goals, the Faculty of Social Work is developing new educational programmes that enable the transfer of knowledge and collaboration between generations. One of them is a 20-hour educational programme entitled Life Stories in the Embrace

of Memories. The participants learn how to research people's life worlds; they learn about different methods and techniques of recording and analysing interviews, notes of narratives and other forms of narrative recordings on which they learn how to write down people's life stories and narratives. This study focuses on acquiring the verbal and nonverbal communication skills needed to establish working relationships with older people, which is the basis for increasing the strengths and skills acquired with ageing and old age. The participants learn why and how life stories can be used in everyday life and in the social changes of modern times.

In the 2023/24 academic year, the educational programme took place in intergenerational pairs represented by an older person and a younger person. The representatives of the middle-aged generation lead the course and are responsible for its outcomes.

For this study, we qualitatively and quantitatively analysed the questionnaire completed by six older participants in the programme and qualitatively evaluated the written work of nine social work students who also took part in the programme. The participants who completed the questionnaire provided answers to the following research questions: (1) *How satisfied are you with the programme?* and (2) *To what extent did the training meet your expectations?*. Satisfaction was marked on a scale from 1 to 5. The programme achieved very high scores for all the questions (all scores exceeded 4.67). The statement *The course met my expectations* was scored, with an average score of 4.83. The statement *Topics considered in the course were interesting* received an average score of 4.67. The statement *I used the topics addressed on the course in practice* received an average score of 4.67. The statements *I am satisfied with the expertise of the course teacher*, and *I am satisfied with the method of work* both received an average score of 4.83. The questions that followed required written answers. The first question asked whether the participants would have changed anything in the course and how they would have improved the work. The answers were very positive and indicated that the course was well managed. The participants were mostly enthusiastic about the fact that the course was intergenerational and that they had the opportunity to cooperate with students from the younger generation. Regarding the running of the course, the participants only suggested one improvement, namely, *"To seek a commitment from the participants to attend the course regularly, if they applied – to improve the dynamic."* They were positively surprised with the contents of the programme: *"I was sincerely surprised at what we were doing, and I truly hope that hearing and writing down our stories will help our young co-creators in their work. We are also thankful to their professor/mentor Dr. Jana Mali."* One participant suggested that the course should continue with a further, advanced training course.

While the reasons for participation in the programme varied slightly, all the participants were attracted to its topic, i.e., life stories. They reported having attended the course out of curiosity, a way to spend their free time, and the desire to learn and meet new people. They talked about being drawn to the title and description of the course. They decided to register because they found the topic interesting.

The social work students analysed their experiences of intergenerational learning via written tasks based on the following question: *How have you experienced intergenerational learning?*. With respect to intergenerational collaboration, the development of an inclusive community calls for the development of new strategies for teaching in intergenerational groups, networking between younger and older students and creating strategies for participatory intergenerational research and intergenerational community research (Ličen, 2023, p. 32).

With respect to the need to increase social connections in old age, intergenerational education builds networks, trust, reciprocity and solidarity. This is how one of the students described new

and strong connections and strengthened collaboration between younger and older generations: *“Together, we managed to intertwine socialisation and professional work. We established a warm and trustworthy environment in which we could lead relaxed conversations, laugh together and discover important life lessons. Thus, we strengthened the intergenerational collaboration and contributed to establishing permanent ties between the students of social work and participants of the Wise Faculty project.”* (LH\_3)<sup>1</sup>

The empowerment of older adults through the support of their desire for learning, the promotion of opportunities for learning, and the contribution to families, partners, and the community over one's lifespan, as well as outside paid work, is undoubtedly beneficial for their general quality of life. The social work students who were participating in intergenerational education saw it as an opportunity to increase their confidence and acknowledge their educational path: *“I was worried about the fact that I would run the conversation on my own, that I would be the one to moderate it through potential complications, silences, and potentially difficult subjects and distress that such a conversation may bring. These initial worries soon dissipated as the ladies who participated in our group brought positive, good humour and a desire to work and collaborate with us.”* (LH\_3)

Intergenerational learning has been increasingly considered not only to be personally beneficial but also a good way of promoting the long-term inclusion of older adults in the labour market and supporting younger people in employment. For example, the students reported that while having some knowledge of the topics covered in the programme, learning through the dialogue with the older generation gave them a new perspective and enabled them to acquire additional knowledge that they could use in their profession. One of the students reported, *“Intergenerational learning also encourages the development of core life skills. Mrs. Jožica often shared practical knowledge about relationships, careers and personal development. These conversations served as a source of leadership and mentorship, and personally I think that in a general, wider context, these projects and collaborations offer younger individuals valuable advice on their own life courses”* (DČ\_6). Within this paradigm, older adults are considered mentors who transfer knowledge and ensure a supply of resources to support the achievements and self-respect of younger people, as well as strengthen the bond of intercultural understanding (Clark and Leedahl, 2019, p. 273). This was also noticed in our programme, with one of the students saying: *“During conversations, we learnt much about the development of society, sociocultural progress and the challenges faced by previous generations. This personal confession of a history enables deeper understanding and appreciation of the roots of people's problems today”* (DČ\_6).

Intergenerational learning is as old and young as humankind itself. The European Network for Intergenerational Learning defines it as the exchange of knowledge between people of all ages so that they can learn together and from each other, and from different areas of education (Pstross et al., 2017, p. 160). In our educational programme, we observed the dialogue between the young and old generations, which enabled the younger people to acquire knowledge about ageing and old age from the perspective of user experience, for use in social work: *“The ladies participating in the Faculty of Active Wisdom project raised an awareness in me that old age is not something strenuous, lacking in energy and infused with the fading of life, but that it can be just the opposite, beautiful, filled with challenge, activities, and people can live it each in their own ways”* (AS\_7).

<sup>1</sup> The interview code consists of the initials of the first and last name and the serial number of the interview.

## Conclusion

The ageing of the population is one of the greatest civilisational achievements, and higher education institutions are bound to respond to this phenomenon. In the 2023/24 academic year, the Faculty of Social Work started introducing pilot changes by implementing a 20-hour educational programme carried out according to the principles of intergenerational education as an example of the implementation of the ideas of the age-friendly university movement.

This first year of education shows good results on three levels: (1) it promotes intergenerational learning and education for the exchange of expert knowledge among students of different ages; (2) it enables personal and professional development in the second half of life; and (3) it increases knowledge of ageing and old age and contributes to the prevention of ageism. The evaluation of education showed that intergenerational collaboration is a welcome addition, which is why, at the Faculty of Social Work, we see potential for the development of intergenerational learning programmes and will develop this approach to the education of older people in the future.

Not only do we consider this new model of education for social work to be a new pedagogical practice helping to achieve greater efficiency in the acquisition of competences for social work with older people, we also realise that this type of learning is an opportunity to test and develop the very concepts of social work with older people, allowing us to examine these concepts together with older people themselves, who, thereafter, will probably become the users of social services, where these concepts are practically implemented.

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