

Izvorni znanstveni rad

QUALITY IN EDUCATION FOR OLDER ADULTS: THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA

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Abstract

Slovenia's rapidly ageing population affects the labour market, social services, and education. To address these challenges, extending or enabling second careers through education is essential. Research suggests that retraining older adults for second careers will become increasingly important. This paper explores the development of staff indicators within the establishment of a quality model for older adult education. The University of Ljubljana is creating new programmes and training teachers in line with the age-friendly university movement. Currently, Slovenia lacks a specific quality monitoring system for older adult education, relying on adult education indicators instead. This study, which uses desk research and self-evaluation, highlights that (1) the quality of older adult education is underresearched, (2) staff is one of the key factors in the quality of older adult education, and (3) the field of teacher education for older adults has not yet been systematically developed.

Keywords: *education; older adults; quality; university.*

Introduction

Today, demographic changes and an ageing population present significant challenges that directly impact the labour market and socioeconomic structures. European and national policies, such as the Active Ageing Strategy (Institute of Macroeconomic Analysis and Development [UMAR], 2018) and the Lifelong Learning Strategy (Ministry of Education and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia, 2007), emphasize the need to develop education systems for older adults to promote their inclusion and participation in society. The importance of developing quality indicators for the education of older adults arises from efforts to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities that consider the needs and abilities of this demographic.

Quality education for older adults contributes to improved employability, better health (Gonçalves Gaia, 2024), and greater social participation (Active Ageing Index, n.d.), all of which are crucial for the long-term sustainability of social systems and the economy.

The Active Ageing Strategy (UMAR, 2018) focuses on labour market adjustments, the promotion of lifelong learning, and the creation of an environment conducive to active ageing. This is supported by findings from the Stanford Center on Longevity (2022). In this context, the development of quality education for older adults is necessary to ensure long-term participation in the labour market and to reduce mismatches. Importantly, universities, such as the University of Ljubljana, also include older adults in their strategic plans, thereby contributing to the creation of an inclusive and equitable academic environment.

To provide quality education tailored to the characteristics, needs, and abilities of older adults, it is essential to first develop quality education itself (Možina, 2009; 2010). The development of quality indicators for the education of older adults is fundamental, as it enables the design of educational programmes that are responsive to the specific needs of this group (Možina et al., 2013). These indicators should encompass various aspects of the educational process, contributing to a comprehensive approach that must be based on interdisciplinary methods and collaboration with stakeholders, including universities, ministries, and social partners. Using the example of the Faculty of Active Wisdom at the University of Ljubljana, this paper explores what quality indicators in the education of older adults are and how they can contribute to the development of a quality model. The efforts of the Faculty of Active Wisdom are grounded in the need to create educational opportunities tailored to older adults and to strengthen their role and participation in society.

This paper focuses on one quality indicator—staff—which is analysed in relation to its subindicators. The findings indicate that (1) a comprehensive system of indicators and evaluations to ensure the quality of older adult education in Slovenia has not yet been developed; (2) the development of quality in older adult education is a dynamic process that requires the participation of various stakeholders, as well as the adaptation of material conditions and educational content to the needs of older adults in their environment; and (3) efforts to ensure the quality of older adult education are crucial for promoting the participation of older adults in education.

The Concept of Quality in Adult Education

In our research on quality in adult education, we relied on the established quality system in adult education (Možina, 2010; Možina et al., 2013) and the quality system in tertiary education, including the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the Regulations on the Quality System of the University of Ljubljana. The research described below is part of a broader action research project aimed at developing a system for defining and managing the quality of adult education at the University.

Quality in adult education is defined as a dynamic process shaped by concepts such as perfection, exceptionality, value for money, fitness for purpose, and impact on individual cognitive development. Harvey and Green (1993) identified five concepts of quality: (1) quality as exceptional, (2) quality as consistency, (3) quality as value for money, (4) quality as fitness for purpose, and (5) quality as transformation. Core values—including honesty, respect for the achievements of others, trust, respect for ethics, and openness to innovation—are essential when ensuring quality in education. These values are key to assessing and improving the quality of educational institutions.

The education of older adults at the university occurs within a sociocultural environment where various interest groups interact. These groups include potential and current participants in educational programmes, former participants, teachers, practitioners, educational leaders, faculty council members, the university, social partners, and relevant ministries (e.g., education, labour, family, health). To ensure quality education, it is crucial to establish dialogue among these groups to reconcile different interests and perspectives on quality. Effective quality assurance of educational activities requires addressing questions such as who is responsible for quality, who is interested in its development, who evaluates quality, who influences it, and who limits its development (Možina, 2010, p. 93). These questions help define responsibilities and clarify the roles of various actors in the quality assurance process.

Educational organisations providing education for older adults are influenced by a range of stakeholders relevant to the functioning of the organisation. Therefore, it is necessary to first identify these stakeholders to create a field of dialogue where different interests and views on quality can be confronted and reconciled. In addition to identifying stakeholders, it is important to analyse their characteristics and determine the value these groups bring to the definition, evaluation, and development of quality. The development of strategies, procedures, and methods for involving these groups in quality assurance processes, as well as the design of effective communication strategies, is crucial (Možina, 2010, p. 96). The dispersion of activities and responsibilities for the education of older adults across different ministries complicates communication and consultation with relevant authorities.

Quality in the education of older adults involves adapting educational programmes to the specific needs of diverse groups of older adults, including adjustments to learning content, teaching methods, and support services. The latter is especially important for ensuring the quality of education for older adults. According to research and professional and policy documents (Harvey & Green, 1993; Možina, 2010; 2011; Možina et al., 2013; OECD, 2021; EAEA, 2024; Taddious Morgan & Tungu Khosa, 2024), quality in adult education is well developed, and the system can supplement the development of quality in the education of older adults. In the case of the Faculty of Active Wisdom, this is further enhanced by a quality system in higher education with accountability and improvement at the core of its assurance activities (UMAR, 2017).

The Aim of the Research

The aim of this research is to develop a model for the quality of education for older adults, define quality indicators for education for older adults and establish a system for monitoring and improving educational programmes for older adults at the University of Ljubljana. The first phase of this research is based on desk research. One quality indicator, personnel, is analysed and examined in relation to the subindicators in phase one. We reviewed internal documents and articles in the scientific journals *Educational Gerontology*, *Quality Age*, and *Journal of Adult Education in Slovenia* from January 2019 to the end of 2023 (*Educational Gerontology* until August 2024), in which we did not find any articles in the field of (introduction of) quality in the field of education of older adults. The analysed material was helpful for us to think about the construction of a quality model for the education of older adults and its indicators. The result of this phase is the set of tables (1–6), and figures (1–2) presented below, which are based on the book *Quality Indicators of Adult Education* (Možina et al., 2013). In this phase of the research, we verified these tables via data obtained through desk research and self-evaluation.

Development of High-quality Education for Older Adults at the Faculty of Active Wisdom

The Faculty of Active Wisdom is a community of older adults at the University of Ljubljana, which began to develop at the Faculty of Arts in the academic year 2020/21. At that time, the first group of teachers, alumni and researchers started with the idea of educating older adults at the university and prepared the professional basis for the introduction of educational programmes.

It operates within the University of Ljubljana's alumni network and is organisationally linked to the University of Ljubljana's Lifelong Learning Centre. The Faculty of Active Wisdom brings together various faculties and academies where the education of older adults is being developed. In the 2023/24 academic year, 11 of the 25 members of the University of Ljubljana had already joined the Faculty of Active Wisdom: the Academy of Theatre; the Radio, Film and Television; the Biotechnical Faculty; the Faculty of Economics; the Faculty of Social Sciences; the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics; the Faculty of Computer and Information Science; the Faculty of Social Work; the Faculty of Arts; the Faculty of Theology; and the Faculty of Health Sciences.

In developing its educational and research practices, the Faculty of Active Wisdom is guided by the principles of the Age-Friendly Universities Movement and the WHO Principles for Age-Friendly Cities: (a) developing an inclusive university that fosters connections between seniors, alumni and students; (b) increasing knowledge about ageing and old age (education and research) and raising awareness of the importance of active ageing and the impact of ageism; (c) developing new programmes (especially socially innovative practices) to promote the rapid flow of knowledge and collaboration between generations and with the social environment.

It offers nonformal education for individuals aged 55 and above in the form of courses, lectures, counselling, excursions, and study circles. These activities are not part of the public service and are funded either by participant contributions or are free of charge, financed by the NOO-Ultra project, which includes the subproject "Lifelong Learning, Sustainable Development and a Long-Lasting Society." This project focuses on the development of learning content, strategies, evaluation, and a microevidence system for older students. As part of this project, a quality system for the education of older adults is also being developed. The objectives of this system are as follows (Ličen & Gruden, 2023, p. 1):

1. At the level of annual process reviews, the quality of education in each academic year should be examined to improve education, and the results for planning the next academic year should be used.
2. At the level of the overall project, a set of indicators was developed to monitor the quality of education of older adults at the University of Ljubljana (development of an indicator system).
3. At the level of the development of educational gerontology (pedagogical gerontology): To investigate ways to apply the findings and indicators on quality monitoring in andragogy and to transfer expertise to the field of educational gerontology; to develop recommendations for the application of different methods and levels of evaluation.

The results of desk research show that quality maintenance at the Faculty of Active Wisdom is aimed primarily at learners (i.e., older adults) (see Table 1). In addition, it addresses university management, the teachers or lecturers of individual educational programmes, educational organisers, member faculties and academies, competent ministries, and others.

The level of quality depends not only on the competence/professionalism of the lecturers and the organisers of senior education but also on the material conditions, educational technology, and spatial conditions. We note that the development of quality is not limited by the actors but by the material conditions and the limited knowledge of the specificities of the target group of older adults.

Table 1. *Quality analysis of the Faculty of Active Wisdom*

QUALITY	THE FACULTY OF ACTIVE WISDOM
Who is quality for?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • for participants in training programmes • for lecturers of training programmes • training providers • to the LLL Programme Board and the UL microcredentials • university management • the competent ministries
Who is interested in quality development?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participants in training programmes • lecturers • education organisers • the Faculty of Active Wisdom management • UL member faculties and academies • university management • the competent ministries
Who assesses quality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Faculty of Active Wisdom • individual faculties and academies • The LLL Programme Board and the UL microcredentials • university
Who influences the level of quality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lecturers • education organisers • the Faculty of Active Wisdom management • faculties with their own spatial conditions
Who limits the development of quality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • space constraints at individual faculties • unadjusted timetables for older adults • poor knowledge of educational gerontology among teaching staff and practitioners • misunderstanding of the activities of the Faculty of Active Wisdom at some faculties

Quality Areas in Education for Older Adults

There are no quality areas for the education of older adults aged 55 and over. Therefore, at the Faculty of Active Wisdom of the University of Ljubljana, we have defined thirteen quality areas according to the model of adult education developed by the Andragogical Centre of the Republic of Slovenia (Možina et al. 2013) (see Figure 1). For each area, we have defined quality

standards in the form of statements that indicate the desired quality of the most important quality areas of the Faculty of Active Wisdom. Building on this, we have defined quality indicators that provide more detailed indications of the important quality aspects and define the area under consideration to determine whether we are achieving the defined quality standard. Finally, we have written down the criteria (objectives) that we use to assess the quality standard.

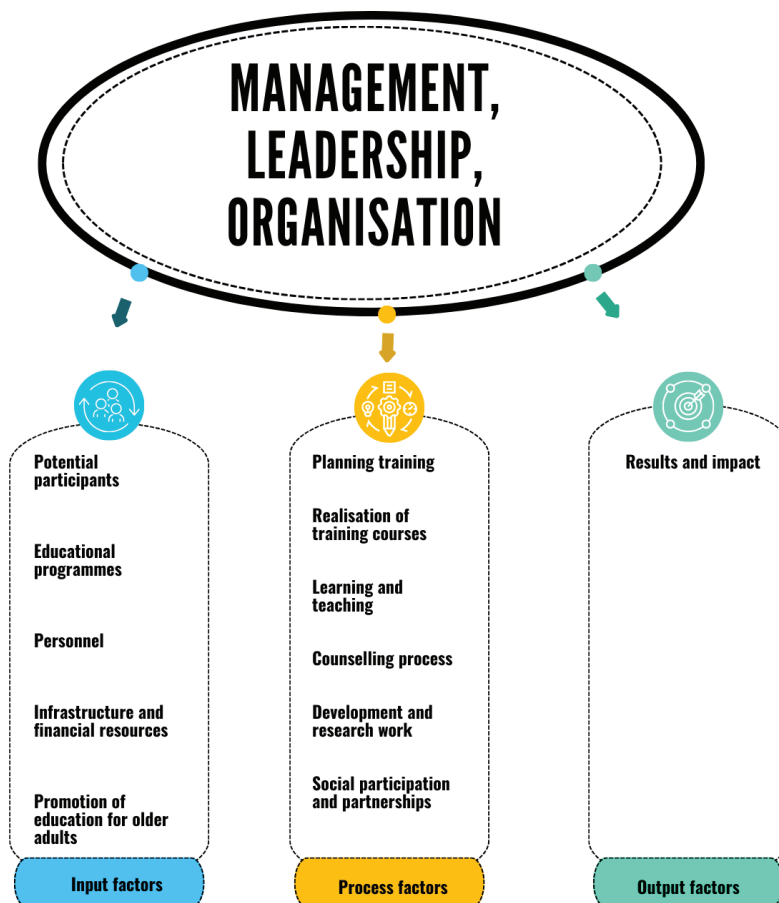


Figure 1. Thirteen quality domains of the Faculty of Active Wisdom

Quality Area: Personnel

Personnel are the most important part of an organisation. Good planning and appropriate hiring decisions are important. Every employee can contribute to the success of an organisation. However, once you have hired the right people, the work does not stop there. Management must pay particular attention to maintaining work motivation, a good working atmosphere, good communication and well-being in the workplace. Employees may be physically replaceable, but their skills and knowledge cannot be replaced. This is because each person brings different skills to the table, even if the work requires the same skills. For the quality area of human resources, we have identified two subareas of quality (see Figure 2) and four indicators and written down the criteria against which the identified indicators are reviewed and assessed.

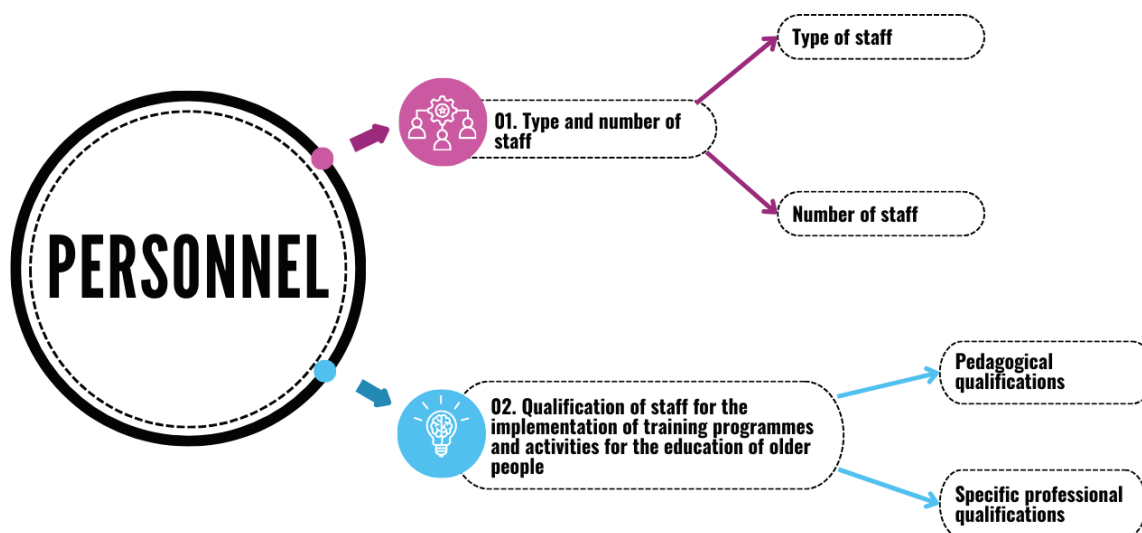


Figure 2. Quality area: Personnel

Subarea 1: Type and Number of Employees

Furthermore, the subareas of the type and number of staff and the corresponding indicators are presented based on indicators in adult education (Možina et al., 2013), desk research, and self-evaluation (see Table 2 and Table 3).

The organisation of educational activities for older adults requires an appropriate number and type of staff to lead, manage, plan, implement, and support these activities. The Faculty of Active Wisdom ensures that all operational aspects are adequately covered, including management, educational organisers, teaching staff, and support staff. Our evaluations confirm that staff are essential for the successful delivery and sustainability of educational programmes.

Four main committees lead faculty administration, while organisers and faculty members contribute to program development and implementation. Despite staffing challenges, the number of faculty members increases annually, allowing for the expansion of educational program offerings.

Table 2. Indicator: Types of staff

Quality standard	The Faculty of Active Wisdom provides staff for leadership and management, planning and implementation, and support activities for the education of older adults
Criteria	The Faculty of Active Wisdom has management staff to lead and manage the organisation, the educational programmes, and the support activities it delivers.
	The Faculty of Active Wisdom has professional staff who plan, organise, monitor, assess and develop the quality of education for older adults.
	The Faculty of Active Wisdom has teachers and other providers of educational programmes who are appropriate to the type of educational programmes or activities it delivers.
	The Faculty of Active Wisdom has professional staff to provide various forms of professional support to learners.
	The Faculty of Active Wisdom has financial, administrative, and technical staff that provides adequate support for all processes.

Table 3. Indicator: Number of staff

Quality standard	The number of staff involved in the provision of education for older adults or in support activities shall be consistent with the scope of the education for older adults' activity and the way in which it is delivered
Criteria	The number of staff involved in the management and administration of the Faculty of Active Wisdom, the educational programmes and the support activities is in line with the scope of the activities and the way in which older adults are educated.
	The number of staff planning, organising, monitoring, assessing and developing the quality of education for older adults is in line with the scope and delivery of the support activity.
	The number of teachers and other providers of educational programmes is in line with the scope of activities and the way in which education for older adults is delivered.
	The number of professional staff involved in the professional support of trainees shall be in line with the scope and delivery of the support activity.
	The number of financial, administrative, and technical staff to provide adequate support for the implementation of all the processes of the educational organisation is in line with the scope and the way in which the activities of education of older adults are conducted.

The staff of the Faculty of Active Wisdom can be divided into areas of management (leadership of the Faculty of Active Wisdom), educational organisers, and teachers or professors. All are, each in their own way, very important for the functioning of the Faculty of Active Wisdom, but in our assessment, and as confirmed by the evaluations of the educational programmes, the teachers play the most important role—the key role—in the delivery of the educational programmes and in maintaining the participation of the elderly in the educational activities of the Faculty of Active Wisdom.

We have already mentioned the importance of faculty work above, but below, we focus on the leadership of the Faculty of Active Wisdom, which is guided by four committees:

- The Active Wisdom Faculty Coordinator (UL level): Coordinator of the UL Faculty of Active Wisdom, who also runs the UL Alumni Club network, of which the Faculty of Active Wisdom is a member.
- The Active Wisdom Faculty Council: This Council supports and advises the coordinator. The Council is composed of teacher representatives (two faculty members), student representatives (two students) and representatives of the organisers, coordinators, and education managers (education organisers).
- Academic Assembly: This assembly is composed of all teachers involved in the teaching or research process of the Faculty of Active Wisdom in the current academic year and meets once a year after the completion of the educational programmes (first week of June).
- Student Council: This Council consists of a group of students (eight students from different programmes) involved in development, advising and orientation, representing the students' wishes and interests, and bringing the students together.

The work of an educational organiser for seniors is not a systematised area of work in higher education. This work is conducted by two part-time staff members, one at the Rector's Office and one at the Faculty of Arts, which organises and runs most of the educational programmes within the Faculty of Active Wisdom.

Teachers, who have a positive attitude towards older adults, participate in the educational programmes of the Faculty of Active Wisdom on a voluntary basis. Faculty, lecturers, and teaching

assistants who are already active in the university’s degree programmes participate as lecturers. Researchers and doctoral students also participated.

The financial, administrative, and technical staff are provided by the Rectorate and the member faculties of the University of Ljubljana. Owing to the lack of financial staff and the resulting overload of employees, we have problems with the payment of lecturers’ fees, but this has not yet led to any major dissatisfaction among teachers. Staffing levels are adequate and are increasing from year to year (especially teachers) (see Table 4) because of the increasing range of educational programmes offered and, consequently, the number of participants.

Table 4. *Number of teachers involved in the Faculty of Active Wisdom programmes by year*

Study year	2021/2022		2022/2023		2023/2024	
	No. of programmes	No. of teachers	No. of programmes	No. of teachers	No. of programmes	No. of teachers
	3	3	21	31	28	40

Subobjective 2: Staff Capacity to Deliver Education Programmes and Activities for Older Adults

The ability of staff to deliver educational programmes and activities for older adults is critical to the success of the Faculty of Active Wisdom. In addition to having enough staff, it is important that they are adequately trained to work with older adults. The Faculty of Active Wisdom operates in accordance with higher education legislation and university regulations, although the area of education for older adults is not yet systematically regulated. Therefore, the Faculty of Active Wisdom sets its own standards and quality criteria, drawing on the University’s existing system. Key aspects of staff qualifications are presented below, which include training conditions and specific professional qualifications (see Table 5 and Table 6).

Table 5. *Indicator: Educational conditions*

Quality standard	Staff involved in the leadership and management, planning and implementation, and support activities of education for older adults shall meet the educational requirements laid down for this purpose.
Criteria	The management staff meets the educational requirements for the activity of education of older adults.
	The professional staff who plan and organise the education of older adults, monitor its delivery, and assess and develop the quality of education of older adults, meet the educational requirements for conducting the activity of education of older adults.
	Teachers and other providers of educational programmes meet the educational requirements for the provision of education for older adults.
	The financial, administrative, and technical staff shall meet the educational requirements set out in the job description.

Table 6. *Indicator: Specific qualifications*

Quality standard	Staff delivering educational programmes for older adults or support activities for older adults requiring specific qualifications shall meet these conditions.
Criteria	Staff delivering educational programmes for older adults requiring specific qualification conditions shall meet these conditions.

There are no educational requirements at the university level, no specific positions systematised for the educational activities of older adults, and no specific educational requirements for management personnel with a background in social sciences and humanities. The coordinator at the UL level and the two education organisers (one at the Rectorate, the other at the Faculty of Arts, as the member with the widest range of programmes available) also have a background in social sciences and humanities. The coordinator is a psychologist, and the two education organisers are adult educators. They have access to specialist training at home and abroad, which they also make use of.

The organisation of education is considered to be fully adequate by 90.16% of the students, 6.56% consider it to be partially adequate, 1.64% consider it to be adequate, and 1.64% consider it inadequate. Teachers consider the organisation of work to be adequate. They are mostly satisfied with the organisation, with only one teacher expressing dissatisfaction with the need to communicate with a larger number of education organisers. Some problems arose because of the premises at the Faculty of Arts. In the winter semester, there were problems with heating in one of the lecture rooms.

At the Faculty of Active Wisdom, we strive to attract the highest-quality teachers for older adults—professionals with interdisciplinary knowledge and experience. These educators possess the skills to analyse the needs, preferences, and interests of older adults; design educational programs; and effectively employ discussion-based and distance learning methods. They are familiar with the unique characteristics of older learners and can foster positive relationships and group dynamics. Additionally, they demonstrate flexibility, proficiency in modern technologies, and a broad skill set, including communication, social, and counselling abilities. Mastery of native and foreign languages and an entrepreneurial mindset are also among their strengths (Findeisen, 2024, p. 8). The Faculty of Active Wisdom teachers have at least a university degree and a distinguished record of achievement in their field of expertise and/or in the field of education of older adults.

Regular training in the field of education for older adults is also provided by the Faculty of Active Wisdom, which organises training for all teachers and other professionals at least twice a year. The teachers, who are mostly university professors, are highly motivated individuals for whom teaching older adults is a very positive experience or, as one interviewee put it, “a complete surplus”, and therefore like to be involved in other activities of the Faculty of Active Wisdom (participation in conferences, round tables, writing scientific papers, participation in promotional activities, etc.), but in the interviews, they have specifically pointed out that they feel there is a lack of knowledge in the field of older adults’ education. They have particularly highlighted the didactics of teaching older adults or educational gerontology. In Slovenia, there are very few educational programmes that offer such content (only at the Third Age University, and they are intended for their mentors), and therefore, teachers support the development of training programmes for educators of older adults (both formal and nonformal).

The Faculty of Active Wisdom teachers reported strong intrinsic motivation to teach older adults and were willing to invest a significant amount of their time in developing programmes for older adults. They also perceive a high level of commitment and gratitude from trainees. The financial-administrative-technical staff is employed in accordance with the University of Ljubljana’s systematisation.

Conclusion

Demographic changes and the ageing population are creating significant challenges for the labour market and socioeconomic structures in Slovenia. In response, European and national strategies, such as the Active Ageing Strategy and the Lifelong Learning Strategy, emphasize the need to develop inclusive education systems for older adults. Quality education for this demographic is increasingly recognized as essential for enhancing employability, health, and social participation, all of which are crucial for the sustainability of society and the economy.

Research at the University of Ljubljana, particularly through the Faculty of Active Wisdom, focuses on establishing a quality model for older adult education. This model is grounded in established frameworks from adult and higher education, such as the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), and draws on the work of Možina et al. (2013). The concept of quality in adult education is understood as a dynamic process, incorporating values such as honesty, trust, and openness to innovation and requiring the involvement of diverse stakeholders, including educators, students, university management, and relevant ministries.

The Faculty of Active Wisdom serves as a case study for the development of quality indicators and standards in older adult education. The faculty operates across multiple university departments and offers nonformal educational activities for individuals aged 55 and above, funded by participant contributions and external projects. Its approach is informed by the principles of the Age-Friendly Universities Movement and the WHO's guidelines for age-friendly communities, which aim to foster intergenerational connections, raise awareness about ageing, and develop innovative, inclusive learning opportunities.

A central focus of the research is on personnel as a key quality indicator. The findings highlight that staff competence, motivation, and satisfaction are critical to the success and sustainability of educational programmes for older adults. The Faculty of Active Wisdom is committed to recruiting highly qualified educators with interdisciplinary expertise, strong communication skills, and an understanding of the specific needs of older learners. However, the research also reveals gaps, such as the lack of systematic training programmes in educational gerontology and the absence of specific educational requirements for staff working with older adults at the university level.

The faculty's administrative structure includes multiple committees and councils to ensure effective governance and representation of both staff and students. While the number of staff is increasing to meet growing demand, challenges remain in terms of material resources and the need for further professional development, particularly in the didactics of teaching older adults.

In conclusion, the development of a comprehensive quality model for older adult education at the University of Ljubljana is an ongoing and collaborative process. This requires the establishment of clear quality indicators, continuous staff training, stakeholder engagement, and the adaptation of educational content and infrastructure to the needs of older adults. The efforts of the Faculty of Active Wisdom lay important groundwork for advancing the field of educational gerontology in Slovenia, with the ultimate goal of fostering lifelong learning, social inclusion, and improved quality of life for the ageing population.

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