

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF OLDER ADULTS

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Abstract. *The aim of the article is to find out educational needs of older adults and to discuss the process of the training course development and its implementation jointly with older learners in Lithuania. Mixed methods research was applied incorporating survey and participatory research. The training course was developed based on international survey data aiming to reach older learners who had less possibilities to engage in a lifelong learning process. Data analysis revealed similarities across countries, based on which the general template of the course was developed. It included topics in biological, psychological and sociological aspects of ageing, networking and joint research possibilities. However, data showed that there were variations in needs not only between countries but inside countries as well. Participatory research approach allowed older learners to follow the needs and to make necessary changes. Such changes were made in content (for ex., some sociological topics substituted by culture) and in organization (less intensity and shorter sessions) of the course. Even if the learners agreed to involve in participatory research, at the end they were told that it was too many interviews and discussions. On the other hand, they were proud that other learners will take their designed course.*

Keywords: *biological, co-designing training courses, educational needs, older learners, psychological and sociological approaches in ageing.*

Introduction

Various documents underline the importance of lifelong learning generally (European Commission..., 2019; 2021; 2022; Programme of Non-formal Adult Education and Continuous Training for 2016–2023, 2016) and for older adults specifically (AGE, 2022). National policy documents (LR Neformaliojo..., 1998; LR Neformaliojo suaugusiųjų ..., 2014; Valstybės švietimo 2013–2022 m. strategija, 2013; LR Seimas, 2023, etc.) also stress and regulate older adults' lifelong learning in Lithuania.

However, the data of various reports shows that the reality of older learners' situation is challenging worldwide and locally. UNESCO 5th global report on adult learning and education: citizenship education: empowering adults for change (2022) states that participation of older adults in lifelong learning activities decreased 24% of the 159 surveyed countries. The situation at national level also is worsening. Already in 2020 OECD (2020) has identified educational inequalities among older workers in Lithuania as a major problem. This also caused a growing inequality in the country's labour market. For example, the employment rate of older workers without education was 40%, compared to 80% for skilled workers what was above EU average. The newest report says that "Access to training is highly unequal and few older people participate in learning activities in Lithuania. The overall participation rate in training is considerably lower than the OECD average (27% vs 39%). The gap in training participation between younger and older people is one of the largest in the EU, as less than 18% of older adults participate in training (whether formal or non-formal job-related training). Training is unequally used. It is more frequent for the highly educated, younger, high income, and those working in large firms There are significant barriers to training older people and to engage them in learning. The motivation for training is lower among older persons, who report more difficulties identifying their skills needs and perceive training to be less useful" (OECD (2023, p. 22-23).

Upskilling older workers is seen as one of the possibilities to keep people in labour market and to ensure their successful aging during retirement, but research data shows (Moskvina & Žalimienė, 2019) that readiness of older people to participate in lifelong learning activities aimed at personal development are higher than for training aimed at improving professional competence.

At national level lifelong learning of older adults is analysed from various perspectives. Authors mention it as important prerequisite or factor for active ageing (Bagdonas, Kairys & Zamalijeva, 2017; Gustainienė & Burauskaitė, 2018; Moskvina & Žalimienė, 2019; Moskvina, J., 2020), it is presented in the context of labour market for extending working life (Lengvinienė & Rutkienė, 2016; Moskvina & Žalimienė, 2019). Also, a big attention in research is paid to the Third Age Universities (Kalvaitis, Baranauskienė & Mačėnaitė, 2014; Kalvaitis, 2018; Sėlenienė, 2021). Learners of Third Age Universities usually are described as high-educated, living in urban or suburban areas and active in social and cultural life people.

However, there is very little research about the learning of other older adults. There are various initiatives in the country, but they are not systemized in a scientific way. There are very few researches which analysis lifelong learners needs generally (Kvalifikacijų ir profesinio mokymo plėtros centras, 2021) and old learners' specifically (Moskvina & Žalimienė, 2019). This only study about older learners' needs was published before pandemic, and as the situation during

and after pandemic has changed, there is no any evidence about after-pandemic situation in the country.

Discrepancy between legal regulation and reality, declining numbers of older learners in lifelong learning activities, knowledge gap about older learners (not at the Third Age Universities) highlights the relevance of the article and forces to search for the new ways of older learners' motivation and empowerment. The participatory research approach (Urbaniak & Wanka, 2023) was taken as one of such possibilities.

The aim of the article is to find out educational needs of older adults and to discuss the process of the training course development and its implementation jointly with older learners.

Methodology

Mixed methods research (Creswell & Creswell, 2021) was applied.

Firstly, international survey by four partner universities: University of Lille (France, initiator), University of Minho (Portugal, methodology development), Mykolas Romeris university (Lithuania) and University of Wroclaw (Poland) was implemented with participation of 590 respondents 55+. It aimed to find out older learners needs for the development of training course. Nonprobability purposive sampling applying heterogeneity principle was used. The aim was to reach older adults from various regions, various socioeconomic status, in various health conditions and having various digital competences avoiding easily reached, well-educated and/or trained people with a good access to lifelong training possibilities (for ex. Third age university participants). The article presents quantitative data only of one national sample, which consisted of 110 respondents. Data analysis was done by descriptive statistics.

In the second step participatory research strategy was applied. 14 older learners discussed survey results, adjusted training template to their needs, gave feedback during course implementation. Interviews and discussions with older learners allowed to react and make necessary changes during course implementation.

Main social research ethic's principles were followed, ensuring anonymity in quantitative and confidentiality in qualitative research.

Co-designing training course with older learners

Description of samples.

110 older people have participated in the survey, 95 women and 15 men. The range of the age was 52-90, mean age was 67 (SD 0.78). Data analysis showed that subjective age was significantly younger than the chronological age. Subjective age range was 18-90 years old with the mean age 56 (SD1.11).

Educational level varied from ISCED 4 to ISCED 8, dominating by ISCED 6-7 (ISCED 4- 4, ISCED 5- 22, ISCED 6- 43, ISCED 7- 44, ISCED 8- 6), meaning that most of the respondents were bachelor or master diploma holders what partly reflects the general population in the country.

14 older learners involved in the participatory research. All participants were women. The average age of participants was 76,5 years. Two women had a secondary education, two had a professional education, five women had a non-university higher education, two had a higher university education and one had an incomplete higher education. Learners had very different professions: 3 teachers, pedagogues, 2 nurses, 2 accountants, a typist, a financier, a laboratory assistant controller, a waitress, a food preparation technologist, a construction worker and an operator.

Organization of the training.

Aggregated data of the research allows to describe the “ideal” course in terms of its organization. According to the participants the optimal group size is 20 learners, duration – 20 hours. It should be free of charge and to end with the certificate of attendance, there is no need for academic or any other recognition. They also deny the self-check test at the end of the course.

All learners answered positively to the questions: do you find it interesting that a research project, carried out in groups, is included in the training; and could the training include participatory research? At the beginning researchers were not sure if the learners understood the last two questions even after the explanations what does it mean participatory research. The first feeling was that learners accepted it as one more interesting free time activity but not real involvement in the research. But the later process showed learners full involvement in providing feedback and giving suggestions during course’s implementation.

Content of the training.

The research participants (N-110) were asked about willingness to enrol in training course about age-related challenges: 27.7% responded positively, 54,5 maybe and 17,9 negatively. Data analysis showed that older adults educational needs very depending on demographic data. The respondents clearly declared that they see the value of various training courses, actively described what kind of courses they would like, but at the same time said that they would put little efforts in searching or involving in such courses.

Respondents assessed the need of specific topics in biological, psychological and sociological approaches.

The biological approach included such suggestions as: the novelties on the five senses: hearing, vision, taste, touch and smell; balancing dietary and nutritional needs and the changes in the digestive system, physical activity and motor skills/motricity; sleep and biological rhythms; health literacy. From biological approach the least desirable topic was about five senses (3.0), all the rest were favoured almost equally (3.4-3.5) in Likert scale.

The psychological approach included topics of cognitive and brain reserve; mood and cognition; learning from experience and fostering resilience in ageing; cognitive frailty and preventive interventions; stress, mental health and ageing. From psychological approach the most popular topic was stress, mental health and ageing (3.7), all the rest almost equally less popular (3.1-3.2).

The sociological approach suggested these topics: demographic challenge and public policy; social representations, attitudes, and behaviours; social inclusion; social participation, quality of life and well-being, the later one was assessed the highest (3.6), all the rest much less favourable (3.0-2.7).

At the end of every block of questions an open possibility to write own topic was added. Respondents suggested to include such topics as health literacy, unbalancing of the body (vertigo), e-banking, learning new languages.

In sum, older adults clearly defined their educational needs in suggested topics as well as they defined their own, not mentioned in the questionnaire. Their educational needs for biological and psychological fields were rated higher than sociological one. Looking more precisely to specific topics, respondents expressed the highest need for the topic of mental health and ageing (3.7) in psychology field and social participation, quality of life and well-being (3.6) in sociology. These expressed needs in one or another sense related to well-being thus showing this gap in older learners' knowledge. Older adults tended to rate higher in their interest topics regarding individual health and well-being in a broad sense rather than those related to age-related declines or society.

Implementation of the training.

After adjusting the organization process and content, the course was implemented in five sessions each lasting four hours. Every session was taught by different lecturer, some sessions were at the university, some in other settings, including one session in the museum.

The training course started with the general introduction and discussion about the expectations of the learners. Each session began with a short introduction and reminder about the general idea of co-designing the course. At the end of each session learners reflected on it and filled in semi-structured questionnaire. Soon it became clear that the questionnaires were useless as all the learners for all questions choose only positive answers. Trainers/researches had to make changes and to put bigger emphasis on reflections and discussions.

The course was wrapped up by group discussion about the training process and product – training course curriculum. Group discussion was substantiated with learners designed poster (Fig. 1) and words' cloud.

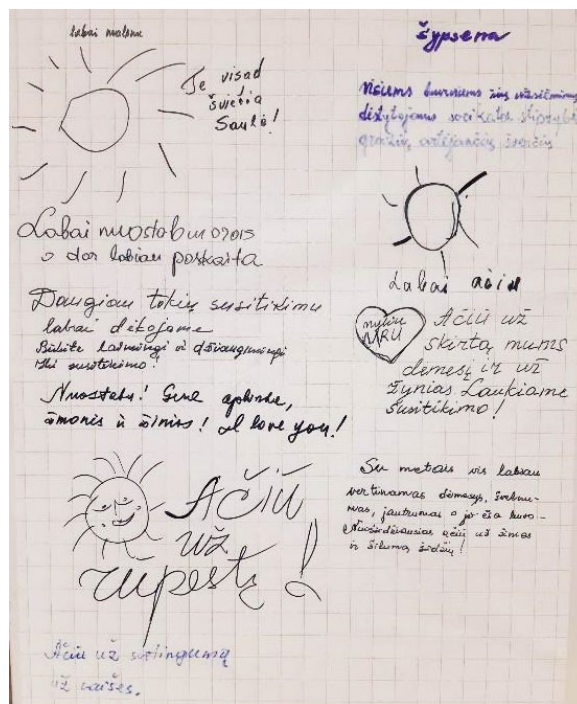


Figure 1. Learners' poster about the feedback of training (group discussion outcome)

The words' cloud included these most common words: being together, knowledge, smile, attentiveness, cosiness, comfort, ageing.

During the reflections after the sessions, while making the poster and naming the words for words' cloud, the learners concentrated more on relations and atmosphere of the training rather than on the content and what they have learned. The question, how much these choices have been influenced by participatory research, stays unanswered.

The future of the course.

The co-designed training course was piloted with the group of older learners and is ready for replication. Now it is open for any older learner. However, as survey data showed, older learners are reluctant for searching and inscribing to any courses, therefore more targeted dissemination and promotion is needed for less active older adults. Complementary idea is to suggest this course to the Third Age University learners who are more advanced in lifelong learning activities and to get their reflections and feedback.

Reflection of the trainers/researchers.

All trainers/researchers were experienced in working with older adults, however, this training course brought new challenges. First of all, the content of the course and sessions were changed according to learners' needs and trainers' possibilities. Thus, the general concept and comprehensiveness of the course had to be monitored very carefully as the initial idea was to have integral course but not five loolsy interconnected sessions.

Secondly, the participatory research put additional requirements for the trainers. They needed to find balance between knowledge they want to share and participatory research activities. It brought bigger workload than just giving the lectures and also called for more energy in working with learners. Some trainers had done participatory research previously, but co-designing the training course with older learners brought new experience.

Conclusions

The training course was developed based on survey data aiming to reach older learners who had less possibilities to engage in lifelong learning process. Data analysis revealed similarities across countries, based on which the general template of the training course was developed. It included topics of biological, psychological and sociological aspects of ageing, and participatory research possibilities. However, data showed that there were variations in learning needs not only between countries but inside countries as well. Participatory research approach allowed to follow older learners needs and to make necessary changes during course implementation. Such changes were made in content (for ex., some sociological topics substituted by cultural) and in organization (less intensity and shorter sessions) of the course. Even if the learners agreed to involve in participatory research, at the end they told that it was too many interviews and discussions. On the other hand, they were proud that other learners will take their designed course. Co-designing training courses via participatory research was beneficial for all participants: older learners and trainers/researchers. It also could have a wider impact on older learners' population and professionalization of the researchers in participatory research.

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