

## Where do you find a forum for the elderly to study science and arts? Structural problems and chances of promoting this type of studies in Germany.

At none of the German Senior Citizens Days has so much importance been attributed to the experience and knowledge of the elderly as in 2006, the eighth one in Cologne<sup>1</sup>. The arguments discussed there may be summarized in two sentences:

- Elderly people take an interest not only in topics concerning their own generation, but equally in problems their children face today and their grandchildren tomorrow.
- No society being faced with grave and urgent problems of any kind is able to afford, when it comes to solving these problems, doing without the intelligence, factual knowledge and insight of persons advancing in their age.

Whoever, motivated by these findings, walked through the Symposium in search for societies or organisations which represent the scientific interests of the older generations was disillusioned. In "BAGSO" Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Seniorenorganisationen (Federal Society of the Organisations for Seniors) which also sponsors the German Symposia are organisations standing for the political, but not the scientific interests of the elderly<sup>2</sup>.

Many of those elderly, now retired, were holding jobs connected with science and arts, such as research scientists, lecturers at universities or colleges, authors and editors. Yet where do we find associations of emeritus professors, where are societies of older researchers and developers, where the academic consultants, and where the elderly with experience in solving scientific problems who could actively participate in the discussions of these symposia? They are in a position to express openly the scientific insights and capabilities of problem-solving of the third and fourth generation. Many of the actual questions concerning the future of mankind are of scientific nature. Where are then the institutions of sciences and arts or meetings of the elderly at which the mental power of the older generation could lead to the creation of needed centres? Where would it be possible for those who departed from active employment, from leading positions at scientific institutions and other organisations to participate dynamically and publicly in the formulation of the problems to be solved? Where is the place for them to take part in scientific activities? Where could members of the older generation have a key influence in solving the important questions graded by priorities, in other words in research policy<sup>3</sup>. Will BAGSO not remain a torso, when organisations which clearly portray the scientific intellect of the elderly are missing?

True, there exist a considerable number of so called universities for seniors, however as a facility for guest-students at the universities, they have through their members no legitimate representation, since their heads belong to the younger generation and their supporting associations do not have a regular vote. How important sciences and arts would be for organisations of seniors may be measured by the weight that BASCO assigned to the older gerontologists. Without questioning the importance of gerontological findings, the point may be stressed that the scope of queries to be dealt with is immeasurably larger than this narrow sector of gerontology. Gerontology plays merely a minor role in the problem consciousness of the elderly. Would it therefore not be desirable for the political councils which are firmly established at state and federal level to correspondingly set up scientific (not only gerontological) committees of the

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<sup>1</sup> A summarizing Report of the 8<sup>th</sup> Senior Citizens Day is found under: [www.bagso.de/dst06.html](http://www.bagso.de/dst06.html)

<sup>2</sup> Cf.: BAGSO: „Lobby der Älteren“, [www.bagso.de](http://www.bagso.de). The six organisations cited in the directory of BAGSO under „Erfahrung und Wissen“ as member organisations cannot claim to represent the width and depth of the cognition of facts and problems which exist among the elderly. Also the *Senioren-Experten-Service (SES)* is unable to represent the cognitive capabilities inasmuch as it places seniors immediately after terminating their professional pursuance. This however, does not include the knowledge and experience typical for the 70 and 80 years old seniors. The BAGWiWA is up to now not in their records of the member associations.

<sup>3</sup> The question here is not about the undisputed influence of the Emeriti who, to the regret of the successors to their teaching chair or institution are not eager to part from the academic position they hold. The question here concerns those who attained a certain distance from their working life but despite this fact aspire that their voice be heard.

older generation? Such committees would be in a position to give the seniors one or, in view of their heterogeneity, according to their scientific discipline a number of voices in the public discourse. Is the political intellect of the seniors not becoming blind, when not accompanied by the scientific intellect?

It is my request here to make those concerned, through a public discourse, aware of the missing scientific voice of the elderly. It is not the objective to find out how the rapidly ageing knowledge and experience of older people achieve a greater weight, but to find out

- how could the capabilities of problem-solving, which is their real capital of those who retire from professional life be incorporated in the open process of problem-solving,
- how could the inevitable removal of the older intellectuals by a new generation of academics which is typical for the sciences (even for gerontology) be fruitfully exploited,
- and what role should the public assign to the third generation, this new type of anthropological phenomenon, i.e. the mental and physical fit and more or less economically secure elderly and to their scientific intellect in particular?

The Universities are overtaxed with current responsibilities and presently not in a position to address these questions. On the other hand, the so-called universities or colleges for seniors are, in their present form, confronted with a three-fold dilemma.

- For one, as an establishment for guest-students they are for the next 10 to 15 years exposed to the enormous pressure of dislodgment caused by a leaping increase of first-year students<sup>4</sup>.
- Next is the structural reform of studies<sup>5</sup> known by the key word "Bologna" which has completely lost sight of the interests of the elderly. The elderly do not exist there at all.
- And thirdly, a broad majority of emeritus scientists who no doubt are part of the older generation view the establishment for studies of seniors as their forum in exceptional cases only.

With this background in mind, I am attempting in the following to illuminate the chances of development of the so-called universities for seniors. Under what structural conditions do they function today? What perspectives open for them in future<sup>6</sup>?

### **In retrospect**

Since the first attempts to start studies for seniors in the seventies in Germany<sup>7</sup>, adequate bases have been established at almost all universities and colleges. The demand for these grew with the growing number of potential elderly students respectively<sup>8</sup>. Simultaneously however, the structural conditions at the universities revolutionized, such that the studying seniors of today have to find their way about in a totally different environment. The so created and now increasing difficulties to be tackled by the study-institutions demonstrate the acceptance that they have reached a critical point in their own development.

I remember well the year 1978, when I was asked to draw up a first-time report<sup>9</sup> for the no longer existing AUE<sup>10</sup> (Arbeitskreis Universitäre Erwachsenenbildung) considering the science-related functions in which members of the older generation could possibly be engaged in. The question asked at the time was, which of these activities could actually be performed by them: some of them, or all and which one in what discipline in particular? The idea to prepare senior citizens for a place in science-related occupations

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<sup>4</sup> Cf.:KMK (2005) In the next 8 years the German universities are faced with the task to raise funds for additional 50.000 study places for first-time students each year.

<sup>5</sup> Cf.: BLK (2002) and KMK((2004).

<sup>6</sup> Refer to: Meynen (2005).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Zentrum für wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung, Oldenburg (1980). A concise survey of the phases of developing the study of seniors is found in Sagebiel (2006).

<sup>8</sup> Statistisches Bundesamt (Publ.) (2006).

<sup>9</sup> Arbeitskreis Universitäre Erwachsenenbildung: Die heutige Deutsche Gesellschaft für wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung und Fernstudium (DGWF).

<sup>10</sup> AUE-Projekt W 0175.00: Meynen D.: „*Kriterien und Funktion wissenschaftlicher Weiterbildung im Gerontologischen Bereich*“:1979.

gained in the early years a foothold at several universities simultaneously and spread around with astonishing speed. A euphoric decade followed. Universities in Germany opened their gates willingly, newspapers reported extensively about the grey-haired students, and in 1984 a nationwide working group came into being, joined by younger planners and ideation-inspired sponsors of the academic institutions: the BAGWiWA (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft – Wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung für Ältere). Since then and until today the number of elderly persons interested in further studies is growing continuously. It is easy to predict that their number is growing faster, since their share in the population is increasing and with it their earlier education is showing signs of improvement. This now is the worrying point: The readiness of the universities, to accept these students has reached all possible limits, what is there to do?

### The conditions for a frame-work, as they presently exist

To illustrate the present state of affairs, the situation of older guest-students is exemplary. Those who aim at taking-up German language or literature studies in Hamburg meet an order of the administration which locks the door to seminars. Any elderly person who intends to study philosophy in Cologne needs a good amount of luck, in order to belong to the very few admitted due to the application of the numerus clausus (restricted entry). The problems at the German universities arising from student capacity have become so great that their administration, which in the past had admitted the elderly with pleasure, view them today as a nuisance to get rid of. Should the situation only nearly approach what statisticians have calculated, namely that in those humanoria which are preferred by seniors, every lecturer has to look after 93 first-time students, how can he find additional time for the older ones? When, following another calculation, in Berlin at present three out of four younger applicants to study-places have, for reasons of serious budgetary shortages of the state of Berlin, to be rejected, why should there be funds for investing in the further development of universities for senior citizens? Since not only the number of applicants for first-time studies but also the number of senior students grows, the problem is aggravated.

There are a number of additional factors which reduce the chances of advancing the studies for seniors: The **structural reform of studies**<sup>11</sup> agreed to by the ministries responsible for the progress of science and arts in the countries of the European Union which met 1999 in Bologna was aligned according to its objectives: Internationalisation, modularisation, graduation and quantification of the studies. It did not include any reference whatsoever to the study interests of the seniors. The guest-studies allowing the elderly the participation with the younger students takes into account only in exceptional cases the special cognitive interests and formulation of questions of older students.

Only few of the study facilities for seniors at the universities have their own independent status. Generally we do not find **committees capable of decision-making**. Most facilities depend on committees of the university at which seniors are inadequately represented. And if they are, they quickly become “the fifth wheel of the wagon”, i.e. they come off worst.

The only politico-educational agency which represents the interests of studying seniors and which I recognize at present is BAGWiWA. Consistent with the standing orders however, no seniors are part of this agency. It is an organisation not **of** seniors but **for** seniors. As an *„Organisation of facilities in universities, colleges and similar establishments relating to the scientific furthering of the education of older people“*, membership is conditioned *“to the main occupation”*<sup>12</sup> of the affiliations. Without any doubt, this organisation has to its credit important contributions made to the study amenities for seniors; simultaneously however, their voice is too weak to have any major impact. To quote an example for this situation is a statement made to the German Senior Citizens Day 2006 with the view to draw attention to the currently critical situation. It was ignored entirely by all newspapers affiliated to the German Press Agency and to my knowledge appeared in no publication of the larger universities.

**Private support associations** for the advancement of study facilities for seniors exist in many locations of universities, but have until today not reached a common platform. They hardly know of each other and consequently have no common voice.

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<sup>11</sup> BLK (2002) and HRK (2004)

<sup>12</sup> Quotation from the preamble of the standing order and §5.2. To find in [www.ggwf.net/bagwiwa](http://www.ggwf.net/bagwiwa)

The **state and federal ministries** responsible for the education of seniors as well as for science are divided on the issue, as to which ministry should be responsible for the study of seniors: be it the one for family affairs or for science or for culture or, as the case may be. Subsequently no initiative is in sight.

**Conclusion:** The situation for the future development of study services for seniors is obviously threatening. Looking at it from the point of guest studies, the subject is continually pushed to the corner. The universities close their eyes, when it goes to rehabilitate serious studies for those retiring from working life, as it would presuppose the crystallisation of concepts, the planning of necessary structure and organisation, and the planning for assigning personnel. Should this topic nevertheless have a prospect to develop, the forcefulness must come less from an approach by the universities than from the initiative of the intellectual impulse of the seniors themselves<sup>13</sup>.

It is therefore necessary to think about the preconditions which would make it possible for the elderly to create independent platforms for realizing their science related interests. Such could be within a wider framework of its own or in an associated area within the universities. What then are the necessary conditions and what are the requirements under which such cores could develop?

### **Basic thoughts capable of supporting the plan.**

First I want to outline the groundwork for the basic supporting conditions and the general trends which we have to look at and on which a university for the third age (U3A) with a capability of further development may be founded.

- The number of well educated and in science or arts interested elderly persons will increase with the demographic changes that are taking place. The science oriented potential of these persons grows perceptibly<sup>14</sup>.
- The **social problems** of today are much too complex to be solved for all other generations by the middle generation alone. An essential part of these problems is the result of the application of scientific discoveries which cannot be solved without the pertinent knowledge of all generations. A few typical examples are: demographic development, using up of resources, environmental pollution, technologies of calculated risk, poverty, youth unemployment, peaceful coexistence of cultures and religions, dangers of war.
- The more elderly persons were involved in scientific activities and the better those in science or arts interested are educated, the less they are satisfied to be only receiver of the dissemination of ready-made research results. An ever growing number is looking for active **participation in the process of scientific discoveries**.
- Specific **intellectual assignments** may be resolved by nobody better than by elderly people scientifically educated, and above all, those with many years of experience, a broader overall view, available free time, the absence of outside pressures and a good measure of reflective thought.
- In order to be able to come to terms with the shared open questions, the elderly interested in science subjects require a **common location**. No other location appears to be more suitable than the university.

To the science oriented intellect of the elderly belong retired scientists or those with emeritus status and, as a matter of course, older students. It is unfortunate that no longer any contact exists between the older students and the retired from managerial committees in the faculties of universities themselves. On the

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<sup>13</sup> Examples for initiatives which can be extended by their own effort are the study weeks of the *"Stiftung Forum für Verantwortung"* of the Europa-Akademie in Otzenhausen the only foundation for scientific and post-occupational education known to me, as well as the federally organized association " Virtuelles und reales Lern- und Kompetenz-Netzwerk älterer Erwachsener" (ViLE e.V.) which aspires *"die Weiterbildung interessierter Seniorinnen und Senioren, gemeinsam auf den verschiedenen Interessensgebieten zusammenzuarbeiten, sich gegenseitig zu unterstützen und ihre Kompetenzen anderen zur Verfügung zu stellen"*. Cf.: [www.vile-netzwerk.de](http://www.vile-netzwerk.de).

<sup>14</sup> BMFSFJ (1997), (2005) and Statistisches Bundesamt (2006).

other hand, when it has nonetheless to do with the experience, knowledge and the ability to solve complex problems of the older generation, older students and scientists with emeritus status no longer constitute separate groups. Only jointly they comprise the intellect of the older generation.

### **Distinguishing characteristics of the universities for seniors and the educating universities**

With the view to enable the universities to establish a separate section, namely a university for seniors, distinguishing features have to be specified for the educating university.

- People in their third and fourth life period whose life shows the encounter with equal historic events and changes and who look back to thirty or forty years of working and/or family life are confronted with a different set of scholastic questions than those younger ones who joined the flow of historic events at a later stage whilst occupational experience is still ahead of them. The same applies to all academics with emeritus status. They view the common problems from a different perspective and have at their disposal other possibilities to tackle these problems.
- When their active professional commitment has passed, the elderly look at academic discoveries no longer from the point of instant or ensuing professional advancement but **for their own sake**. These discoveries become for them a value of their own. In this perception they are in harmony with the ideas of the Humboldt University. On the other hand and in contrast to this view, the vista of the younger students is more pragmatic, since they place emphasis on the occupational utilization of the acquired knowledge, at least this is their perspective.
- Anyone who has worked for thirty years in a narrower or wider sense within one subject area is seeking at the end of his occupational life for avenues where the limits of his earlier discipline may be exceeded. At any point we may find that older persons are more likely attracted by a wider interrelated knowledge of disciplines than their younger counterparts. What they are looking for is a kind of general study course which embraces the specialized single science subjects of research with the view of familiarizing themselves with their interrelationships and the resulting integration. This is meant not as a popular synthesis alongside the separate sciences, but as an innerscientific countermeasure to specialization. Younger students who wish to acquaint themselves first with one special subject area are at a later stage looking for professional specialized subjects. For these students professional and specialized studies have priority.
- The older students constitute on account of their often very different course of life and their different experiences a **heterogeneous group** the members of which however, seek one another for communicating in the exchange of their different experiences and wisdom worlds. Younger students on the other hand, form at the start of their studies, i.e. after their school-leaving examination which is standardized by the state (Abitur) a much greater homogeneous group. According to their different professional aims and directions they follow different routes, learn in each case the subject-specific language, are being socialized in the specific culture of the profession and go along different passages and on their way to specialisation separate from each other. The longer this process takes, the more they become detached from each other.
- For the older ones the **common key-problems** of the western societies which I have listed above are firmly established in their conscience. The question, how we intend to live together, concerns all generations. This theme however needs an internal or external force whose voice will keep the topic alive in the public conscience at all times. It is not impossible that the third generation which by professional implication has become useless and whose social functions will have to be defined sooner or later could undertake this particular task in a way similar to the Gerontes of ancient Greece. In order to do so in a world, where sciences dominate the entire life process, universities and colleges for science and arts are for the older generations an absolutely vital necessity. There the elderly would be in a position to revive their study in all issues of their concern.

**Theses for exploring the viabilities of establishing a university for the elderly.**

Provided the sketched-out foundation is capable of carrying the load, and the characteristics of differentiation apply, a number of theses may be put up in respect of the chances for establishing prospective universities for the third (and fourth) generation.

Universities for senior citizens only have a prospect of being established, developed and further maintained:

1. provided they are implicitly **forums of the scientific intellect of seniors** in our society, by being institutions, in which the capabilities of solving academic problems by those seniors retired from their occupational life meet. And this with a view to participating at the open discussion of central issues concerning life today. This open function is, similar to any university, its primary function, although the further education of the elderly will be its secondary. At what other place could the scientific reasoning power, the reflecting problem conscience of the third generation come together if not at the university of the third age? The University for Seniors would then be the academic forum for long-term social thinking, the carrier of a continuously functioning colloquium which will not examine the diversity of issues concerning daily processes but their relatively small number of guiding ideas. It is a colloquium of the third generation at which naturally the second generation is invited to participate, however not in a tune setting mode.
2. provided they accept the notion of the intellect of the third generation being composed in actual fact of that of the **older students and** with equal weight of **researchers with emeritus status, as well as lecturers at universities and colleges**. Universities for senior citizens gain academic profile and substance only in case of researchers with emeritus status, lecturers at universities and colleges as well as older students are forming a joint study group and carrying through the sketched-out colloquium. These are meant as a specific sector of the "*scientific community*" and not as science-external addressee for the "*public understanding of science*"<sup>15</sup>.
3. provided they address male and female members on equal terms. In case, as we at present frequently witness, the female participation predominates with a far above average percentage over a longer period, one has reason to suspect a structural fault, possibly a wrong selection of courses, or a course with misjudged emphasis, or the lack of research potentials, a trend generally favoured by male participants.
4. provided they develop by the manifest initiative of the seniors themselves and find their orientation by the cognitive interests of the seniors. What these seniors request, must be formulated and expressed in clear terms by aims and by content. This kind of formulation cannot be left to the next generations. What the elderly are looking for at the universities, they must state themselves and make it publicly known. The objectives und structures are necessarily determined by the type of problem-setting and the perspective bearings of the elderly. This does not mean however, that in many questions of common nature they may act without the cooperation, coordination and organisation of support by younger students.
5. provided the universities do not dedicate the planned studies exclusively to the problems of the elderly, but include as well the attentiveness to **wider questions of our time**. Universities of seniors which serve only the further education of the elderly and provide communication among them, without generating a wider-ranging benefit of knowledge, have no lasting chance of survival. After departure from regular professional engagement, the elderly hold what younger students precisely miss: time for thinking and reflection, time for discussion and debating. Whereas the working day of a member of the second generation imposes a strain on him whilst constantly reacting to the relentless flow of events, allows the gained distance from professional life the elderly to follow their impulse to engage in the meaningful evaluation of topics and problems, with the view to generating future ideas

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<sup>15</sup> A university for senior citizens accepted with this concept differs from the institutions of formal sciences, as described by Peter Faulstich and others, since the elderly active there, even after departure from their professional scientific activity, are subjects engaged in the scientific process and remain producers of new discoveries, in contrast to being addressees of scientific results. Cf. Faulstich 2006.

and long-term perspectives. No pressures for reducing expenditures, no thinking in terms of financial returns and no compelling decision-making put a stop on developing visions worth striving for.

6. on condition that they take up the elders' manifold interests of cognition **in an adequate thematic diversity**: Their interests in the substance of the sciences, in interdisciplinary problem areas, in the socio-cultural and historic diversity and the philosophies. The open functions of the seniors conceived by their inter-disciplinary interests should not be of a self-contained character, but must be open to interested juniors.
7. on condition that the seniors' study rids itself from its bondage to gerontology and frees itself from an up-to-now marginal situation in such a way that it dovetails the studies much tighter than hitherto to the common degree course (Studium Generale). The designation "Studium Generale" should not be misinterpreted as an open function for all-round education. It is not so much about this kind of education and about general knowledge, than about the preoccupation with the generally open problems faced by societies today. It is indispensable that these problems first enter the science-oriented conscience and are logically formulated, before they are treated in an inter-disciplinary meaning.
8. on condition that the knowledge acquired there is regarded as a gain to and within the university itself. This gain is the only criterion for safeguarding its lasting livelihood. If we define the study without regard to the age of the student, it becomes substantially just an interdisciplinary study, a study for its own sake and is in this way indefinite. The envisaged gain for science and arts consists of the methodically striven for integration of the separate disciplines in the total all-over-context of the science-oriented conscience. This is to be achieved every time afresh and the strengthening of the original motivation of cognition and the search for problem-solving without purpose. The study of seniors, looked at from this point of view, aims at forming a sizeable cord of European university tradition which connects today's universities together with their roots. Assuming the endeavour of cognition without purpose had found at the university a location well protected up to now, then this location is now in serious danger, since the usability of knowledge plays there the first role. The ex-differentiation of an institution within a university which predominantly served the cognition without purpose would constitute a fitting response to this danger.
9. on condition that, under the existing state of overcrowded and underfinanced universities and colleges, the seniors take to a great extent charge of the organisation themselves and, with the assistance of supporting agencies and foundations, **finance** the universities for seniors **themselves**.

The model for the unity of science, valid now as before, requires however that the universities for seniors be developed under the umbrella of existing universities. Autonomous universities for seniors have no chance of surviving, should they break loose from the institutional unity with the existing university.

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