

# **Towards the future of higher education for the elderly**

## **A stimulus for further thought**

Old age has a new face in the form of the "young elderly". The bitter feelings of old age have been replaced by a period of "later freedom". Those who retire at sixty or sixty-eight today still have as a rule ten or twenty years in front of them. They have lost neither their ability to work nor their ability to learn and the years remaining are not marked by inactivity. However the "young elderly" no longer do or learn what their career requires. Rather they are lead by their intelligence and inclination. A considerable proportion of the young elderly seek to broaden their horizons by travelling in foreign cultures and to deepen their knowledge by taking up or returning to higher education. The students with grey hair in the lecture theatres can no longer be ignored.

Nevertheless the potential for academia and for society hidden in the intellects of those who have left the world of work remains a terra incognita. They are just guests in the eyes of the universities and they are too varied and heterogeneous for society to be able to allocate them clear roles and functions. And the elderly themselves appear to be only now discovering the possibilities of achieving a public understanding regarding their potential. In any case they realise that their role in the family as grandparents does not yield a public role in society.

With this in mind four of these young elderly met up in June 2008: a geographer, a mathematician, a lawyer and a philosopher from the Netherlands and Germany. All being familiar with university life, they discussed the current role of elderly people in academia and at the universities in the remote ancient town of Goslar. The sole purpose of their meeting was to investigate the significance and social meaning of post career studies and to look into the immediate and more distant future. What is the point of ever greater numbers of elderly people going to university? What are they looking for there and what do they bring with them? Do the courses offered by the universities correspond with their interests? What should be done to assist their learning at an academic level? Which didactic questions arise in this context? What is the nature of research and teaching in old age? How should old and young students and old and young teachers co-operate?

This text, which summarises the content of that discussion, should provide an impulse for the public discussion on the meaning and significance of studying in old age. It should also encourage readers to consider further possibilities for development.

## **The Problem**

People experience urges which remain with them well into old age, even until the last days of life. These urges, which exist in many of us, include the wish to participate in the communal life of our surroundings, to remain independent and active, to learn new things and to continue to educate ourselves. These urges are especially evident among those older people who are interested in studying and taking part in university courses after retirement. These individuals are less concerned with the usefulness of knowledge than with the joy of gaining new areas of knowledge and deepening and optimising the knowledge already at hand.

There can be no doubting the fact that older people possess significant knowledge and expertise, life experience, maturity, reliability and powers of discrimination and that ever more of them have higher educational qualifications and had academic careers or worked in fields linked to academia. There can also be no doubting the fact that, at an age when physical abilities diminish, the main contribution of older people to society lies in their mental

capabilities. This is particularly true when those who have left the work-place possess a considerable amount of free time and when their material situation enables them to engage with the long-term questions for which younger people, who are tied up in the breathlessness of the life of work, lack distance and time. But it is equally clear that this capital which the older generations have to offer is not being utilised. There are no institutions in which they can collect their intellectual capabilities and make use of them.

In this regard the problems of the future, which loom on the horizon, are of such a general nature that the older as well as the younger generations will be affected by them and the efforts of all will be required in order to solve them. Which elderly people are not affected by the problems in the fields of energy, environment or health which will arise in the immediate and distant future? And how can they be solved if not by an adequate alteration in the behaviour of old and young alike? It is not any different in respect to the problems of the unpredictable money markets or the creeping erosion of our democratic institutions or the question of justice in distribution in the global economy or of migration or inter-religious or intercultural conflict in a world in which communication happens ever faster. It is a key feature of these general long-term problems that they cannot be solved purely through the work of experts or solely by the workings of the employment system.

The ability to understand and analyse the problems of living together is one of the mental capabilities of many older people. If they are no longer able to solve these questions as part of their working life, they at least seek to be in a position to comprehend them mentally. This desire to understand is one of the most important contributions older people can make to the continued existence of our culture. The maintenance of a free and democratic society and the nurturing of the cultural infrastructure cannot be ordered or forced upon people. They are reliant on the will of the entire population and therefore require people to extol their benefits publicly. How can one extol their benefits without understanding the system's advantages, problems and opportunities and how can they be understood if not through deliberation assisted by academic research.

### **The current state of Higher Education for the elderly**

An attempt to take stock of the state of Higher Education for older students in the countries participating in the EFOS (European Federation of Older Students) should start with the following points:

- The number of older students is growing continually.
- Those interested in studying increasingly hold better academic qualifications compared to the past.
- Almost all universities have opened their doors to older "Gaststudenten".
- New media has made communication easier for older students and provides easy access to academic information and sources.
- The growing number of older students gives them more influence, even if they are not yet aware of this fact.

These tendencies, which are beneficial for higher education for older students, need to be seen alongside a significant number of unsolved problems, which impede the establishment of a serious programme. These are:

- The unclear public role of older people, for whom further education could be demanded politically.

- The heterogeneity of previous educational achievement and current interests among older people.
- The widespread lack of interest in the universities in engaging with the questions and cognitive interests of the older students.
- The overcrowded lecture theatres, the scarce equipment of the institutions entrusted with organising the older students' studies.
- The lack of theories on which older people participate or want to participate in which courses and for what reasons.
- The low level of institutional framework for the study programmes of older students in the universities.
- A lack of self organisation among the older students
- The broad absence of emeriti and retired academics from the middle segment of the university hierarchy in study programmes for older students.
- The lack of political will among older students and the absence of a strategic plan.

These problems will not be solved through inaction. In a free democratic society the only path which promises success in changing existing conditions is for those affected to join together, formulate a common goal and argue for it publicly. Nobody can do this for them. No one can assume the task of putting their wishes into words for them. This general rule is certainly also true in the case of post-retirement further education

### **The idea of a university for the older generations**

In our view the higher education institution for the older generations which is to be established should be dedicated primarily to the fundamental and general academic and societal questions of human co-existence and co-habitation and its foreseeable further development. We assume that such an institution would be a branch of the university and that, due to its remit, it would develop its own subject profile, which should be structured with long-term developments in mind.

This concept of a future institution of higher education for the older generations has the advantage that, instead of the needs of the third phase of life, a societal remit is placed at the heart of the project. The task is one for which the older generations are particularly well qualified. The thoughts of the elderly are related not only to each other but also to the social tasks of all generations and the focus is placed not only on the older students but also on the older teachers and researchers.

But there can be no questioning the fact that this kind of concept presents many difficulties. To mention but a few:

What kind of process should be used to determine the fundamental and general questions to be looked at in this particular manner by the older students?

Does this concept take enough account of the fact that the older generations are not a homogenous group but mirror all the heterogeneity of society as a whole?

And is it okay to assume, as is done here, that the older generations have developed a consciousness of the public roles, functions and tasks which older people are drawn upon to perform and for whose adoption they must educate themselves further?

It cannot be overlooked that it is the view from the outside that dominates the discussion on the role and function of the elderly. In other words questions of income security, healthcare and residential circumstances of the elderly from the perspective of the young stand large. Until now the questions and intellectual interests of the elderly have played only a small role if any. The elderly rarely voice their own views in the public debate and do not take part in the discussions as equal partners.

The same lack of clarity as to their inclusion in the social process is also to be found with regard to their involvement in the academic process. Here too the self-conception of those who are active in academia as their main employment and career dominates and the post-retirement academic understanding of the elderly has of yet not been audibly articulated. A retired academic is faced with the same lack of a clear academic role with public recognition and with which they can identify, as is any other retired worker in society. They retain a connection to their discipline or career field, but without a function or task. The academic role of the retired teacher, researcher and scholar as well as the older student is not defined at all. Emeritus teaching staff have become *de facto* guests just like the older students.

Now we come to the question of the specific character of the search for knowledge in the phase of life starting with retirement. On the basis of Paul Baltes' five criteria of wisdom, five directions of investigation can be identified which characterise the post-career search for knowledge:

They are to do with:

- the search for facts regarding fundamental problems of knowledge,
- strategic questions about the treatment of decision making in research and teaching/learning processes,
- questions about inclusion of academic and expert knowledge in the academic and societal context,
- questions about inclusion of scholarship in a universal value system,
- questions about the treatment of ignorance and uncertainty.

There is a wide consensus today that wisdom cannot be taught, but it would seem plausible that it can develop out of a continuous search for answers to such fundamental questions. It is certainly fair to say that there is no university institution which is dedicated to the fundamental problems of knowledge in our society, to the decisive questions and the link between knowledge and morals and the handling of the large gaps in our knowledge and the uncertainties of our society. But exactly that would be the remit of a knowledge senate. And that is exactly why higher education institutions for the older generation are worthwhile.

### **On the institutional dimension**

The study programme for older students in its predominant form is currently a long way away from an institution of higher education for the older generations. It is basically a guest study programme, which allows older people to participate in the academic career training of the young. Events and courses for senior citizens are as a rule in the form of a service which the university offers to people in its immediate surroundings. In the most recent policy document of the German conference for university presidents, further education (July 08) was dealt with under the rubric *marketing measures of the universities*.

The universities are at present, especially due to the Bologna process, almost entirely oriented towards the knowledge requirements of the employed section of society. Older people not wishing to study according to the rules governing career academics are only allowed into university courses as paying onlookers. The idea that the post-retirement situation brings with it other questions and other knowledge needs different to those in scholarship carried out for career reasons meets with little response in today's universities. The study programmes and course curricula do not cater for the problems, questions, knowledge and experience of the emeritus teaching staff and older students.

Very little cooperation between the old and the young has developed in university life. Intergenerational study programmes, which are rightly being called for, academic dialogue between the generations and cooperative problem solving, have gone past the stage at which they are paid mere lip service only in a few places (Cologne, Graz).

The organisational forms which the universities have developed for older students amount to little more than differentiating between courses in which older students can take part and ones in which they cannot and charging tuition fees for the former. The organisation is a long way away from developing the character of a faculty (except in Groningen).

In addition it should be stated that the majority of the so called higher education institutions for older students are like a torso in that they possess a student body and an organisation but lack teaching staff. Emeritus teaching staff and retired academics from the middle of the university hierarchy do not view the study programmes for older students as their platform, but nevertheless have built up even less of a platform for themselves.

Questions:

- What should an institution look like that collects the intellectual capital of the elderly for social tasks?
- Do study programmes for older students require their own faculties?
- Is the Bologna university able and willing to integrate a new branch with general rather than specific directions of investigation?
- What preconditions must be met in order to integrate study programmes for older students within programmes for professional training? Are there gradations to this integration?

The concrete question of the institutional form is totally open at present:

Should there be a kind of faculty completely integrated within the university structure or an independently run or parallel institution, autonomous or affiliated? Foundation, association or limited company? To what extent can the older students organise themselves? Are the Emeritus teaching staff their natural spokesmen?

Who can publicly represent the intellectual interests of the older students?

Is the Humboldt University the true ideal for the universities for older students?

Are the alumni just the sponsors and dignitaries of the universities or should they provide their own ideas for research and curricula?

Differing forms of study programme for older students have been developed at the various universities: thus in Berlin, Bielefeld, Brno, Dresden, Frankfurt, Graz, Groningen (older students academy-faculty with student body, teaching staff and organisation) Hamburg, Cologne, Mainz, Münster, Namur, Otzenhausen (Europe Academy), Ulm, Wroclaw, Wuppertal, to mention just a few. None of these appear as yet to have become a model for the others.

## **On the academic didactic dimension**

While academic didactic theories and methodologies have been developed over the last few decades for basic professional academic education and training, there has been no parallel development for study programmes for older students. Nobody is in a position to say who can or should study, teach or learn what, to what end and in what way. The same is true for the question of what should be researched.

The knowledge needs of the elderly are only in their plurality comprehensible and only attainable in a widely designed discussion. But it can be summed up and presented by a few.

- Where should the public discussion on these aims take place?
- Which theoretical relationships can be used to derive these aims of learning (of a non-professional, personnel and society oriented kind)?

The form of the courses should be oriented towards the participants and the questions. The lecture is by no means the sole or even the typical course form. Seminars are better suited to the preferred questions. (There is no need to ignore the need for entertainment on a high level.) The sizeable possibilities which the new forms of communication offer are particularly suited to the communication requirements of the elderly.

## **On the dimension of interaction between students, teachers and researchers.**

### **The role of the older students**

The older students vary greatly in what they are interested in. Some study with great ambition, others just want to listen in a bit without committing themselves. Some come to hear a famous person or study just for fun. If they do not take part in the normal professional study programmes, they follow an individual syllabus, which they have prepared themselves and for which they receive no support in the form of a general syllabus developed for older students with similar interests. There is no agreement on which common knowledge needs they have and in which categories they should be organised. There is an often mentioned consensus amongst the organisers regarding the expectations of the older students according to which they are not simply looking to consume, to argue or to fight. On the contrary they have a need for harmony and show a desire for entertainment on a higher level. It is often stated that they prefer communal outings and trips to workshops. But what kind of a syllabus can be developed from these diffuse ideas?

Of more use is the general observation that fundamental questions are preferred to having a predetermined framework, discussions on interdisciplinary questions rather than subject specific questions, that older students tend to attempt to attain an overview of the situation and that they want to achieve a certain farsightedness. They are more inclined towards questions to do with wisdom and judgement and less interested in subject specific questions. They are more than anything interested in - to put it very generally - questions of meaning, questions about the fundamental pragmatics of life and society.

Due to the way in which knowledge is used in the sphere of employment, the intellectual interests of young and old vary greatly. But public recognition of this difference is yet to develop to any significant extent. Older people have difficulty with the insight that they should not only solve the problems they face, but also discuss these problems with the rest of society. Of course they are reliant on support in doing so. But the support does not replace

their own activity. The fact that the problems which they leave for others to deal with are solved by those others to their own ends is accepted by the majority of older people as an unalterable fate.

### **The role of the emeritus teaching staff**

At present whenever the discussion turns to study programmes for older students, little mention is made of the emeritus teaching staff. They identify themselves with the organisations for the study programmes for older students only in exceptional cases and the older students, for their part, do not see the emeritus teaching staff as belonging to their ranks either. Nevertheless they have to be taken into consideration when dealing with the issue of a higher education institution for the older generation. And it cannot be overlooked that the interests of the emeritus teaching staff and the older students converge in some regards.

Emeritus teaching staff normally withdraw after retiring to do some catching up and finish projects that were left by the wayside. Many seek regeneration from the stresses and strains of university life. Others feel the need to bring together the quintessential aspects of their life in research and their knowledge. Research and teaching amount to their mission in life for many. Therefore they desire forms which would enable them to continue their research activity without external obligations. They feel the need for an auditorium in order to be able to continue their teaching activities without obligation. They seek interdisciplinary contacts and dialogue with people from areas of knowledge which were previously only accessible to them in abstract but not in practical form. They wish to have contact and discussions with colleagues from other faculties. They have a need for a suitable way to continue their activities.

In the course of their activities teaching in higher education they are familiar with the generational conflict amongst the teaching staff, but they have to really learn their role vis-à-vis their younger successors first after retirement. There is little consensus regarding the nature of age specific research and teaching, intellectual interests and knowledge construction. But it is clear that post-retirement teaching and research cannot simply be an extension of previous activities. Neither should it be linked to a demand for an extension of working hours.

Emeritus teachers in higher education are just as heterogeneous as older students. Some were at the peak of their productivity in their younger years, while others reached their peak late in their careers. Subject, intellectual disposition, health and family environment all play a role here.

It will be necessary to consider the forms of recruitment, remuneration and duration of involvement of older professors.

A remarkable way of bringing Emeritus teaching staff and older students together was developed at the University of Groningen within the framework of their "Senior Academy". Emeritus teaching staff with various specialisations meet up six times a year, in order to plan lecture courses for older students. As soon as a concept (e.g. "body and mind" or "culture and cognition") is ripe for development, a working group is formed which decides upon content, dates, teaching staff etc.

## **On the political dimension**

It is evident that older people have a large electoral potential. The older generation however acts like a sleeping giant. They are as little aware of their political strength as they are of their intellectual potential. Their heterogeneity prevents them from formulating an agenda for the aged, in which the further development of their knowledge and their ability to make judgements would play a noticeable role. The supraregional and European associations do not provide an effective impulse. A political central objective in the field of education reform which is dedicated to the public tasks, functions and roles of retired older people is still a million miles away.

It would be desirable to develop an agenda which could guide the attention of the politicians in this area of current inactivity.

- How could the social knowledge requirement which the elderly could meet with their research ability and knowledge be identified?
- How can this requirement be implemented in policy?
- How would the findings on and from the study programmes for older students be implemented in education and scholarship policy?
- Can there be such a thing as an education policy for older people?
- Who could determine the central aims of such a policy?
- Are there any social groups which are or could become the natural allies of the elderly?

## **On the practical dimension**

The truly significant impulses can only come from older people with academic interests. It is not enough to engage oneself with an ideal. For this reason the formation of interest groups amongst the older students at the universities and the connecting of these groups in national networks is a necessary precondition for any further developments. These networks must present and discuss their ideas and experiences in the supranational organisations EFOS (European Federation of Older Students) and AIUTA (Association Internationale des Universités du Troisième Age).

From amongst these networks a guiding group must be formed which collects ideas and consciously promotes the process at the universities and in education and academic policy.

A few practical suggestions:

An academy group should write to the older higher education teachers and present them with the idea of remaining active after their retirement and getting involved in an interdisciplinary discussion group. All staff over sixty should be written to.

In the same way older employees should be written to as potential students.

The following points would deserve being emphasized:

- The intellectual capital of older people,
- The societal need for the abilities of older people,
- The social role of older people,
- The needs of the older students,
- The needs of the emeritus teaching staff after their retirement.



## **Conclusion**

We assume that the questions of the future affect every generation in our society and that every generation has something to contribute to their solution.

We assume that at the age at which physical strength is in decline the intellectual knowledge and abilities of the elderly are their most valuable capital for society.

The further development of these abilities appears to us to be essential, if older people are to contribute to solving the tasks which are at present already observable.

A future higher education institution for the older generations should for this reason not be designed to cater for the continually changing and strongly differentiating preferences of the older students, but should be designed according to the future tasks which face our society.

It is in accordance with the intellectual interests and abilities of the third generation to want to observe, understand and think through these questions and tasks. For this reason a future higher education institution for the older generations should primarily offer such teaching and research opportunities which are dedicated to these questions and tasks.

Older teachers and researchers should belong to a study community of a future higher education institution for the older generations just as much as the older students.

This study community should get its place within the university and be integrated into the production and transmission of scholarly knowledge.

They should not exclude the young from their courses, but they should design their courses according to the knowledge needs for the social tasks which older people confront.

The initiative to found a future higher education institution for the older generations should come from the elderly with academic interests themselves and gain broader influence through the creation of interconnected networks. That does not mean however that they can do without support from the younger generations.

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