

Continuing academic education for seniors at the Otto-von-Guericke-University Magdeburg

Magdeburg is the capital of the Land Sachsen-Anhalt in Germany. It has 225.000 inhabitants. Magdeburg is famous because of the emperor Otto and the house of the "Ottonen" and because of Otto-von-Guericke the inventor of the pneumatic pump.

Since 1993 the Otto-von-Guericke-University in Magdeburg has been a full university. Up to 1993 there existed 3 universities in the city of Magdeburg: The Technical University, the Medicine Academy and the Pedagogical University. Today about 15.000 students are studying 60 subjects at 9 faculties. In 2009 the study courses of the faculties will be reorganized into Bachelor and Master studies according to the "Bologna process". The main emphasis lies on technical studies, natural sciences, arts, social and pedagogical studies and medicine.

"Study at Fifty-plus" at the Otto-von-Guericke-University

Already during the times of the German Democratic Republic there was the possibility in Magdeburg of further academic education for older students. Particularly famous was the "Medical Sunday". The Sunday conferences are still enjoying a good response. In 1991 a new initiative was created by offering further education to the target group of people above 50. At first there was a group of 13 persons. Today 410 persons between 45 and 86 years are studying with the slogan "Study at Fifty-plus". About 55% are female and 45% male students.

The aims of the study courses "Study at Fifty-plus" in Magdeburg concern 4 points:

- With a wide range of interdisciplinary studies older persons are offered access to continuing academic education.
- By studying together, young and older students have the possibility to learn from each other and to better understand the problems of the other generation. Mutual acceptance and respect are on a high level. There are many positive examples of mutual co-operation between young and old, e.g. scientific exchange in the seminars, coping with the same problems in courses, conversations before and after the courses, or the organization of the student life.
- The experiences of life and the multiple competencies of older persons will influence the learning processes at the university.
- Gerontology and studies of old age should be given more impetus and should provide ideas how to deal with the older generation.

The offer of studies consists of the following modules:

- Opening of selected courses of the regular studies at faculties and institutions of the university.
- Special courses for older students (language courses, sports, seminars additional to the regular range of studies),
- Meetings with students from other German and European universities,
- Offer of joint projects like "Wissend Wandern", dialogue of generations etc.
- Participation in training courses for activities after working life.
- Older students offer seminars for older students.

The university teachers welcome the participation of older persons in the lectures and seminars. The experience of older persons leads to an increase in the quality of the courses. In the seminars contributions to research projects of older students are presented and elaborated.

Reasons why students participate in the programme "Study at Fifty-plus":

Talks with older students have shown the following reasons:

- From my professional life I am used to a certain level of intellectual work. I don't want to stagnate in everyday life. I want to have some say too.
- Through the studies I gain closer contact with my children and grandchildren. I have some say and I can discuss scientific topics with younger persons.
- I can do things after my professional work which I couldn't do previously. In my professional work I only had one field of activity.

- The knowledge also helps me in my philosophy of life. Now I understand many things better. This type of studies helps me to orientate myself towards new ideas in difficult stages of my life. Understanding and comprehension of things increase if you get older.
- The participation in the courses gives me a better self-confidence. I wish to get to know myself better and develop new ways of thinking.
- Studying increases my spiritual and physical well-being. I need the intellectual challenge.
- I use the acquired knowledge to act as counsellor to firms.
- Some women say that they were always longing to have to possibility to study.

Current questions regarding the future development of studies for older persons:

Demographic development:

In 1989 15.9 million people lived in the GDR. In 2005 there were only 13.5 million left. This trend will continue. There is a steady decline in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Saxonia and Thuringia. In Saxonia-Anhalt a rapid decline is expected in the next years. In 2020 between 10 and 20% less people will live in the new German Federal States. Thereby the number of young people will decrease by more than one third. 25% of the population is between 50 and 65 years old. The share of the old (more than 80 years) will triple (see social report Fifty-plus - data and facts regarding the social situation of the 50-65 years old in the new Federal States, Berlin 2005).

Development of the studies of older persons during the next years:

The universities in Germany are presently changing more radically than ever since their existence. Three important developments are to be blamed for that:

- The economic development of the universities: Owing to the cutting down on public means, since 1995 models of business management have been increasingly used at the universities. Gradually the economy gets priority. It is said that universities are not enterprises but must be managed as such. What does it mean for senior studies? In view of the priority of the economy it is to be expected that studies of older persons will come under scrutiny on whether they are financially justified. In my opinion it is not the purpose of senior studies to improve the financial situation of the universities. With regard to further education of older persons the universities have to fulfil a public responsibility. Of course it cannot be free of charge but the fees must be moderate so that all those who wish to attend courses can afford it.
- The distinctive image of the universities (internationalizing and excellence). It cannot be expected that education of seniors will become at the core of teaching. But the current demographic development will also have to be taken into consideration at the universities. It is a fact that in the aims of the universities the public responsibility for Lifelong Learning is mentioned. Thus we can hope that the responsibility of the universities will go beyond the initial education.
- The "Bologna process" will create a more uniform room for study and science in Europe. The performance of students must be comparable within the framework of well defined academic degrees. The courses will be offered in modules. According to my opinion also older students can continue to attend courses under the new conditions. Thus the principle "Young and old are studying together" can be further maintained. Older students can also act as teachers in the courses and can help young students to find employment.

What is the future of senior studies under the current social changes?

In the future we have to ask the following **questions**:

- Are there any further things we can do for the education of older persons besides the usual programmes?
- Which models of senior education have a promising future?
- What is the added value of senior education?
- What is possible and what not?

Which study forms are offered?

- The basic idea "Young and old are studying together" is maintained. This is an exciting motto. Studying together shows different values and standards owing to the socialization of students, reduces prejudices, offers the possibility to examine items regarding social development and offers the chance to think together about the planning of the future of our lives.
- Subjects such as history, German studies, philosophy, psychology etc. will be of future interest to older students as up to now. They will not only consume the contents of the lectures but act as tutors or participate actively in some other form in the learning process. Their interest to participate in research projects will increase.
- Profession and culture will become increasingly more important in later age. Transfer of knowledge from older persons to younger colleagues in firms will increase, people with know-how will become counsellors of firms, activities in an honorary capacity will be practised.
- Projects regarding biographies and questions of life-style for older people will be initiated and will become more important. The histories of time witnesses must be saved or else will be lost. People should write down their own history to avoid alteration by the following generations.
- Education in older age means further development of already existing capacities, skills and interests and the acquisition of new ones, thus enabling people to live a self-determined, independent and full life in one's older age. In order to achieve this, knowledge but also techniques to manage everyday life are necessary and new competences should be acquired.
- International networks of people and institutions are becoming more important. Globalization requires a considerable amount of information. Our meeting in Wroclaw had the purpose to intensify the mutual understanding and the co-operation in the field of continuing academic education.