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Centre for General Scientific Continuing Education at Ulm University**

Public consultation of the European Commission on the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region

Statement: “Lifelong learning programmes for older adults as a societal necessity in the Danube Region”

The population in the Danube region is rapidly ageing

The countries covered by the EU Danube Strategy face an enormous demographic change. According to the newest Eurostat estimations (1/2010), 23.3 % of the population in the Danube region will be aged 65 and over in 2030 – considering that this rate is 16.5% in 2010, the next twenty years will bring an increase of 6.6%.

All Danube countries will be concerned by this development, their ageing rate even exceeding that of the EU-27 (average increase of 5.8 %). Many Danube regions are additionally touched by migration of the working population, aggravating the age shift.

These changes imply major effects on societies, with consequences for the social, welfare and economic life as well as education and culture.

Older adults are valuable human capital

Considering this transformation process, it is surprising that the importance of older adults for all of society is often not considered enough. Seniors will make up almost a fourth of the population in twenty years – it is time to regard them as a valuable constituent of society and to foster their competences.

Older adults (55+) can no longer be regarded as a homogenous group of passive people or a burden in need of care. Rather, they are an active age group with various life styles and social milieus differing considerably between and within countries – just like any other part of the population. These heterogeneous persons possess experiences and competences that are valuable to society and to younger generations, e.g. in the fields of personal, social and professional competences. Older workers and their specific knowledge are needed in the Danube region labour markets. The active participation and social inclusion of this group of the population fosters civil society and is absolutely necessary for the prosperity of society as a whole.

In this context, lifelong learning is a necessity, not a luxury

To fully utilize the potential of older adults, they must have access to lifelong learning offers. As of today, seniors are alarmingly neglected when it comes to educational offers. This neglect is even apparent in the papers submitted in the context of the Danube Strategy: where education is mentioned as a priority, students and scientists are named as the target group. When issues caused by the ageing of society are mentioned, education isn't.

But contrary to widespread stereotypes, mental skills do not necessarily diminish in later life. Older adults just need to be stimulated by learning activities. Furthermore,

brain research results show that learning improves seniors' health and is thus an important asset in health prevention.

Ageing societies like those in the Danube region simply cannot afford to waste the enormous potential of older adults. Lifelong learning is the key to assuring that the competences and productivity of older adults aren't lost to society. It is imperative to provide this growing share of population with learning offers that are specially developed for them. Structures such as the Universities of the Third Age must be fostered and developed. Formal learning opportunities must be combined with informal and non-formal learning environments, e.g. in self-organized groups and post-employment activities. The importance of learning outside of formal structures is growing and should be acknowledged in educational policies and funding.

Lifelong learning as a bridge between science and society

In ageing societies, universities can no longer concentrate only on their traditional clientele. Offering opportunities for lifelong learning to adults age 55 and over should become a new priority. University-based lifelong learning has the task of informing people on the basis of scientific facts. It should raise the awareness for the impact that social and institutional reforms have on everybody in the Danube region. Besides being a societal necessity, such offers directly benefit universities: they create a link between science and society that improves the dissemination of scientific results and the reputation of the university as an institution. By co-operating with NGOs, the positive societal effects can be increased even further.

Structures of university-based lifelong learning already exist in numerous Danube countries, although they differ a great deal. These structures should be fostered and expanded or, where necessary, created. University-based (and other) lifelong learning offers shouldn't only address people with formal educational degrees, but rather all persons wishing to improve their education and wanting to participate actively in the learning process. Seniors can further contribute to intergenerational learning by bringing in their own know-how and experiences and transferring their knowledge to younger generations.

ICT offer great opportunities for learning and social participation

Information and communication technologies (ICT) can be an attractive way of learning together with others and of offering university-based lifelong learning outside of universities. ICT are becoming increasingly important in everyday life, be it at work or in private life. But in the domain of their use, there is a large gap between generations: all throughout the Danube region, older people use Internet considerably less than the average of their country. But nowadays, the competence of using Internet in a productive way is a key qualification.

That is why ICT are a necessary part of lifelong learning: they enable older adults to participate actively in society and to take part in e-learning activities. E-learning has the advantages of accessibility for persons in rural areas and for the physically impaired. It also offers the possibility of blending formal and non-formal learning by offering courses while fostering interactivity, communication and the creation of knowledge-based and social communities.

Familiarizing older adults with Internet use in learning activities is an important step towards fostering their preparedness for political and social cooperation and participation. It enables them to make full use their potential.

Ways of fostering lifelong learning for older adults in the Danube region

By creating a link between universities and society as well as using ICT in lifelong learning, the creation of a democratic knowledge-based civil society will be promoted. An idea to reach such a linkage is the creation of network between universities and NGOs to foster the exchange of good practices in seniors' education. This has already been tried on a small scale in the project "Danube-Networkers" (cf. the project description submitted with this paper), which was a pilot project bringing together university-based lifelong learning, ICT use and cross-border cooperation. As it has shown, the opportunities of ICT facilitate transnational cooperation and increase the benefits to be drawn from it, e.g. by enabling the involvement of inhabitants of rural areas.

Generally, the EU should acknowledge the growing significance of lifelong learning for older adults by giving political priority to their social inclusion. The Declaration of the Danube Summit in Budapest in March 2010 attributes some general importance to civil society actors in a variety of fields. This is a step into the right direction of strengthening the civil society in the Danube Region. But political will should be moved even more towards lifelong learning and the inclusion of older adults. That is what this paper aims at. For the empowerment of this large part of the population and the prosperous development of the Danube region, the issues described above are absolutely crucial.

Ulm, 29/03/2010

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Die folgenden Organisationen und Einzelpersonen haben dieses Statement in schriftlicher Form unterstützt, weitere Unterstützer/-innen sind erwünscht und werden folgen.

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