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# The role of the University of the Third Age in meeting the needs of older adult learners in Poland

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## ABSTRACT

The increasing number of older adults in society is becoming a major social focus. The article discusses demographic changes in Polish society in the context of the role played by the educational institution known as the University of the Third Age. Although implementing the idea of lifelong learning, such institutions constitute an important space allowing participants to experience life more fully by improving its quality. The information in this article can be used by other countries to organize education for older adults.

## KEYWORDS

Lifelong learning; university of the third Age; adult education; older adult students

## Introduction

This article examines educational institutions working to engage older people, which in Poland are known as Universities of the Third Age (U3A). The article presents the benefits from lifelong education resulting from the positive influence on the participants' quality of life. The authors also attempt to assess the effectiveness of actions aimed at older adults in the context of increasing their quality of life.

The aging of society has a significant effect on all countries of the Europe Union, and state social policy toward older people is therefore beginning to gain increased importance. Aging is a global phenomenon. All populations are aging, although the process varies between countries and nations. In more developed countries, the percentage of the total population reaching the age of 65 or more is 13–20%. In less developed countries, this proportion is below 10% (Fry, 2005). According to Eurostat forecasts (Eurostat, 2015), aging of populations in the coming decades will continue at a rapid pace – by 2080, the proportion of people aged over 65 is predicted to grow to 30% of the entire population of the European Union.

As a less socio-economically developed country, Poland faces challenges regarding demographic changes that take place so fast that it is hard to react to them. The results of the Statistics Poland study *Population Projection 2014–2050* indicate an intensification of the aging population process. Despite an expected decrease in the population size of 4.5 million by 2050, a systematic growth in the population aged 60 and above is also likely. The number of people this age will grow to 13.7 million, comprising more than 40% of the total population. Meanwhile, the Statistics Poland study *Resident Population Projection 2015–2050* points to a change in Poland's demographic structure manifested in an increase in the number of people aged over 65 by around 5.1 million. A double aging phenomenon is also forecast, meaning not only a general percentage increase in the older population, but also the fastest

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rise in the population of the oldest section. The number of “old old” people (aged 75–84) is growing faster than that of “young old” ones (65–74), but the fastest-growing population segment is that of “the oldest old” (85 and above) (Dragan, 2011). According to Statistics Poland forecasts, by 2050 we can expect a twofold increase in the number of people aged 80 and over, from 1.5 million in 2014 to 3.5 million in 2050 (GUS, 2014).

The results of the demographic research referred to here play an important role in considering the possibilities of lifelong learning, as they show how important it is to pay attention to the quality of life of older people, whose number in society increases every year. Researchers emphasize that national studies of demographics must be repeated to observe changes in demographics over time. This notion is especially relevant as demographics continue to shift (Hansen, Talmage, Thaxton, & Knopf, 2019).

The aging population not only poses global challenges in terms of pension protection and health care but also affects education, in particular the educational needs of older people. Lifelong learning is believed to promote positive outcomes in the health and well-being of older people (Leung, Lui, & Chi, 2005).

Bearing in mind the need to improve the quality of life of older adults, various forms of activity are dedicated to them. Educational activity of the older adults is manifested at the institutional level. Older adults in Poland can benefit from a wide network of Universities of the Third Age (U3A) scattered throughout the country, which promotes the idea of lifelong learning as part of informal education. Transforming the lifestyle of older adults in Poland, often described as passive and monotonous, becomes possible precisely by conducting lifelong education in places such as the universities dedicated to them (Halicka & Halicki, 2002). The University of the Third Age (U3A) is defined as a space for activation and learning of older people (Zych, 2010). This idea is realized by organizing classes at the existing universities as well as, on the initiative of non-governmental institutions, enabling the intellectual and social development of older adults. The thematically diverse programmes of the U3A are designed to deepen general knowledge, develop interests, foster volunteering and social disseminate gerontological knowledge and promote health and physical activity. Important tasks of the U3A include raising the level of self-esteem of the “third age generation,” its social reintegration, and building a sense of competence resulting from belonging to the university community (Szarota, 2010). All this is expected to improve the quality of life of older adults. This article aims to present solutions in the field of education of older adults in Poland. At the same time, these ideas can inspire other countries to implement new forms of education.

## Quality of life of older adults

One significant issue that requires careful examination is the quality of life of older people. This quality depends both on the individual’s own self-evaluation and on the assessment of other people (Jopkiewicz, 1993).

Quality of life describes the perspective of successful aging. The concept of quality of life has evolved over the years, at first being associated with living longer and having a good level of life in a consumer sense, i.e. so-called material wellbeing (Trzebiatowski, 2011), before beginning to be connected to individuals’ role in society and ties with other people. Quality of life started to be perceived not as just an individual category, but also a social one. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines the concept as “an individual’s perception

of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns” (WHOQOL Group, 1995).

In Poland, studies on quality of life began in the 1970s. In the social sciences, questions of so-called social needs are emphasized, which are treated as more significant than material needs. Since 2000, systematic nationwide panel research has been taking place in Poland titled *Social Diagnosis. The Conditions and Quality of Life of Poles*. The project concerns all the important aspects of the lives of households and their members, both economic and non-economic (Czapiński & Panek, 2000).

According to the study conducted in 2000, older adults are less happy than younger ones. Interestingly, this contrasts with the results of research conducted in the USA indicating that older adults are happier. This phenomenon was called by Laura Carstensen the *Positivity Effect* (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005). The reasons for the different research results in Poland and the USA probably lie in the socio-cultural and economic factors that make the two societies different from each other as well as socioeconomic condition of older adults in Poland, which clearly differ from the level of affluence of older adults in the USA.

In the Polish survey, in answer to the question *How do you evaluate your life to date?* only 1.57% said “excellent,” 29.31% answered “successful,” and 36.30% “quite good.” Among those aged over 65, 1.79% responded “excellent,” 23.57% said “successful,” and 32.72% “quite good.” The most important value to older adults is health, which they consider as the foundation of a successful life.

Simply being retired has very low significance for general wellbeing according to the study – it is rather people’s age that is decisive. *Social Diagnosis 2000* showed that it is not socio-professional status that has an affect on the sense of life satisfaction and other aspects of general wellbeing, but age-related demographic factors and social relations (friends, marriage), sometimes also correlated with material status (Czapiński & Panek, 2000).

*Social Diagnosis* was repeated in 2015. According to the research, people aged over 65 are characterized by the lowest level of satisfaction with quality of life among the groups studied. However, older people also figure among the group who most value good spirits and declare that they have a positive lifestyle. Again, health is among the highest-ranking values (Czapiński & Panek, 2015).

Among the characteristic features of the aging process of Polish society are singularization and feminization. As a result of the demographic aging of society, it will be increasingly common for people to live alone (Adamczyk, 2017). According to Statistics Poland forecasts, this situation will continue in the future, which could result in a sense of loneliness among Polish older adults.

As the *Social Diagnosis 2015* research showed, the role of age in differentiating quality of life may be overstated as a result of the strong connection in Poland between age and education level, which undoubtedly has an affect on quality of life. It, therefore, makes sense to ask whether the only reason for the low quality of life of older people is their age, or whether it is also related to the fact that they are on average much less educated than younger people. Higher education clearly mitigates the negative influence of age on quality of life. The reason for this is the major change in quality of life among the poorly educated and the near absence of such a change among better-educated people (Czapiński & Panek, 2015).

At the individual level, an important factor for older adults is time management, since because one of the main problems with which – according to projections – older people will struggle with being an excess of free time and the question of using it in

a worthwhile way. It is important to counteract the tendencies of older people to withdraw from various domains of social life. Satisfactory aging involves not only a low level of disability and independent physical and mental functioning, but also active engagement and interest in life. The sense of loneliness of older adults can be counteracted by supporting a model of multigenerational families, shaping the public space in a favorable way to older adults, promoting preferential access to cultural life, and also developing the courses offered by third age universities (Dragan, 2011). The question of ensuring a high level of quality of life for older adults is becoming a growing social problem, as people of retirement age will be the largest group in Poland in the near future.

In summary, we can state that quality of life is a category that changes in the course of everyday experience, as well as a function of quality of development in the life cycle. When describing quality of life, individuals use their own experiences, evaluation of the past, expectations for the future and current feelings.

## Methodology

The methods used in this article are an institutional/legal analysis of secondary data, the contents of statistical data. The data come from research by Statistics Poland, which collects and processes statistical information on most areas of public life. The statistical information in this article comes from:

- Central Statistical Office (GUS), *Universities of the Third Age in the 2014/2015 academic year*. The research was carried out using the UTW-1 form. The UTW-1 form had the shape of tables in which university representatives were to enter data concerning, inter alia, the organizational framework, start date, scope of cooperation with the university, goals, type of classes, people conducting classes, conditions that had to be met to become a student of the U3A, number of students, their age, gender, and education, as well as the program offer – its variety, number of classes and their duration, additional activities (cultural events, sightseeing tours), and sources of financing. The forms were completed by 464 U3As. Then, they were collected and subjected to statistical analysis. On the basis of the collected data, it was established that 96,370 older adults participated in U3A classes in the 2014/2015 academic year. Women formed the vast majority (86%) of students of the Universities of the Third Age in Poland. The largest group of students were people aged 61–75 (62%).
- Central Statistical Office in Gdańsk (GUS), *Adult education in 2016*. The survey was conducted in 2017, using the representative method, on a randomly selected sample of 25 thousand households. In these locations, the interview was conducted with people aged 18–69, participating in the system of formal, non-formal, and informal education, in relation to socio-demographic features. The research was carried out using the technique of a direct interview with the respondent without the possibility of conducting substitute interviews. Most of the interviews were carried out using the CAPI method with the help of tablets. It was also possible to conduct an interview using the PAPI method, i.e. collecting information from respondents in a direct interview carried out by the interviewer using a paper form and then registering the data with a mobile application. On the basis of an individual questionnaire, 18.1 thousand people

aged 18–69, including 14.3 thousand people aged 25–64 were surveyed. The legal basis for the study on Adult education was the Commission Regulation (EU) No 1175/2014 of 30.10.2014.

- Central Statistical Office (GUS), *Universities of the Third Age in Poland in 2018*. 599 out of 640 operating U3As participated in the survey. The research was carried out using the UTW-1 form. The survey revealed that 640 Universities of the Third Age operated in the academic year, including 599 which submitted the U3A-1 report. In the 2017/18 academic year, 113.2 thousand students were enrolled at a U3A in Poland. Women formed the vast majority (84.3%) of students of the U3As in Poland. The largest group of students were people aged 61–75 (70.3%).

The authors used the data from the above studies in their analysis, as they concerned the exploration of the educational institutions for the older adults. The surveys were carried out by government institutions and covered almost the entire population of the U3A students. The studies are unique as they are national, institutional level research.

Desk research was conducted to study the subject literature. The main criteria for the selection of the works were the subject matter matching that of the review, as well as their recency. Studies related to the subject of education of older adults conducted by distinguished Polish researchers in the field of adult education, were taken into account (Czerniawska, 1996, 2007; Halicka & Halicki, 2002; Szarota, 2010; Szwarc, 1993; Zych, 2010). Descriptive analysis was used, to study the three above-mentioned surveys by statistical offices, U3A plans and programmes, U3A's own studies posted on websites and academic articles on the activity of the U3A. The data obtained as a result of the descriptive analyses were grouped according to the identified themes. They refer to the description of the development and dissemination of knowledge about educational ideas and problems, providing an understanding of the values, culture, and accomplishments of other communities. It should also be emphasized that the society is constructed by people who create their own subjective concepts and meanings, and the role of the authors was to interpret, i.e., subjectively create, constructs of the already existing social constructs of the subjects.

## Results

### *Education of Polish older adults – development of U3As*

The history of Polish U3As began in the mid-1970s, when the first such universities began to open under the auspices of existing academic institutions. Poland was the first country in the world in which a U3A movement developed, after France and Belgium. The first U3A in Poland dates back to 1975, when Halina Szwarc, a professor of medicine, started to organize courses for older adults at the Postgraduate Training Medical Center in Warsaw. In cooperation with the French professor Pierre Vellas from Toulouse, on 12 November 1975 Szwarc succeeded in inaugurating the first academic year of Warsaw U3A, initially named the Third Age Study Course. The main objectives of the first U3A included:

- Inclusion of older people in the lifelong learning system
- Intellectual, mental, and physical activation of students

- Development of education methods and implementation of preventive gerontology
- Scientific observation and scientific research (Directory of the U3A Section of the Polish Gerontology Society, 1987) (Klimczuk, 2013).

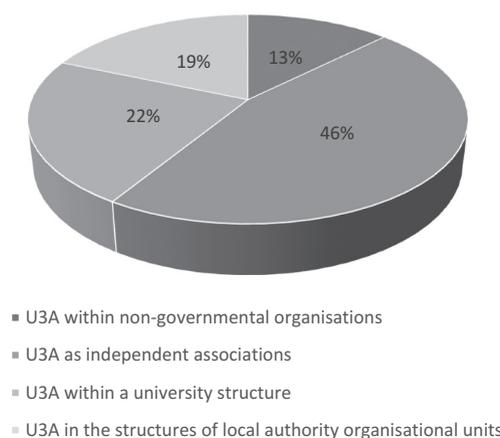
The second university of this kind opened a year later in Wrocław in collaboration with Prof. Szwarz, followed by Opole, Szczecin and Poznań. In academic cities such as Łódź, Kraków and Lublin, third age universities were also formed. Early on in the operation of the first U3A in Poland, their organizers set up a joint association to coordinate cooperation among the universities. In 1981, a proposal was submitted to the Polish Gerontology Society (PTG) to establish a Universities of the Third Age Section, with Halina Szwarz becoming its president (Halicki, 2000).

Polish third age universities operate in one of two main ways. The first is the French model, in which they function under the patronage of regular universities. The second is the British model, in which they are organized by associations, with their own statute and authorities. The vast majority of U3As in Poland are institutions based on the French model.

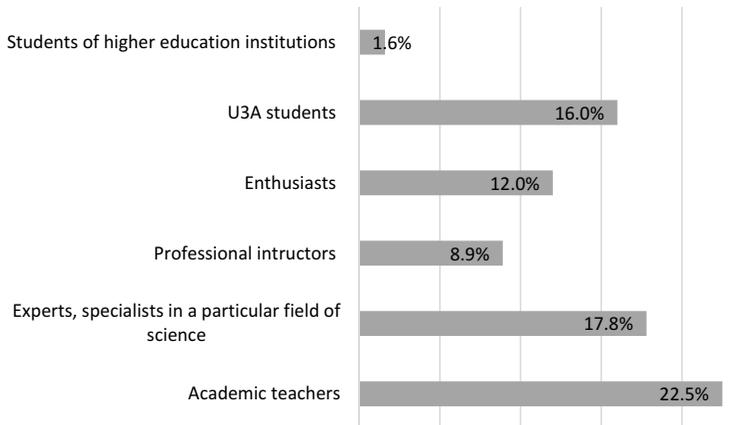
Universities of the third age in Poland have various organizational and legal statuses and may operate in four main forms: as independent non-governmental organizations, as distinct organizational units within another non-governmental organization, as entities functioning within the structures of higher education institutions, and as entities that are part of the organizational bodies of local authorities (Figure 1). The most common of these forms is U3As operating independently as associations (Jachimowicz & Nalepa, 2012).

In 2018 more than 56% of universities for older adults functioned within the structure of NGOs, including 44.7% that were associations set up solely with the purpose of operating a U3A. Additionally, U3As operated within the structures of universities – 21.5% – as well as cultural centers – 17.7% (GUS, 2019a).

Universities of the third age cooperate with or employ people giving lectures and seminars as well as regular classes (Chart 1). Among the 14,000 lecturers working at an U3A in 2018, the largest group comprised academic teachers (4,100), although some 41.1%



**Figure 1.** Legal and organizational forms of universities of the third age in Poland, 2018. *Note.* This figure demonstrates proportions of various organizational and legal forms of U3A in Poland in 2018. Source: based on GUS 2019.



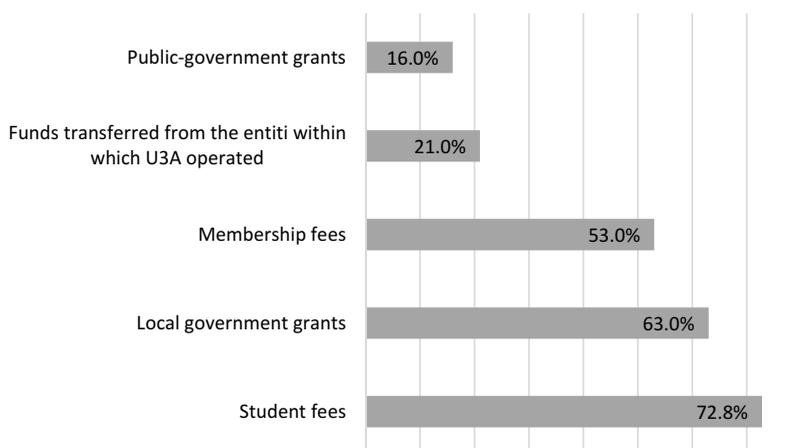
**Chart 1.** Lecturers and instructors of regular classes at Universities of the Third Age in the 2017/18 academic year.

*Note.* This chart shows the overall percentage of different groups of lecturers and instructors teaching at U3A in 2017/2018 academic year in Poland. Source: based on GUS 2019.

of teaching staff worked on an unpaid basis. The largest group teaching or lecturing without pay constituted the students themselves (85.1%), although the U3As incurred costs most frequently when paying professional instructors and trainers – more than 77% of whom received payment for their work.

Universities of the third age are not financed by the Polish state. They mainly support themselves from membership fees set for given universities, subsidies from the municipal or regional budget, or various forms of sponsoring, grants, or funds implemented by the universities (Chart 2). Budgets for operating third age universities varied, from 110,000 PLN to more than 2 million PLN (GUS, 2019a).

Payment for taking part in courses at universities of the third age is similar regardless of the form of institution. When starting a programme, students pay enrollment fees, which are usually in the region of 50 to 200 PLN per semester. They sometimes also pay monthly



**Chart 2.** Universities of the Third Age by major sources of funding in the 2017/18 academic year.

*Note.* The bars in Chart 2 show the percentage of U3As that use particular sources of funding. Source: based on GUS 2019.

fees, which are also not high. For lessons for which organizers have to rent a special venue (e.g. swimming or gymnastics), additional fees may be payable, but these are minimal, not exceeding a few zloty per class. Some courses are subsidized, e.g. by local institutions, in which case students have zero costs. The condition for participation in university of the third age courses is usually age (over 50, 55, or 60) or retired or pensioner status.

In September 2007, the Polish Federation of U3A Associations was formed to promote integration and strengthen the U3A movement in Poland. One of its regular activities is administration of a Consulting and Advisory Point, whose services may be used not only by members, but also other third age universities and individuals interested in setting up a new U3A. The point offers advice on the formal/legal as well as organizational/substantive aspects of operating and establishing a U3A in the form of an association, as well as transforming an existing U3A, operating within a public library or cultural center, into an independent non-governmental organization with legal personality (Jachimowicz & Nalepa, 2012).

In addition to the Polish Federation of U3A Associations, around the beginning of this century, other initiatives supporting U3As – both substantively and in terms of funding – appeared in Poland. In this context, it is worth mentioning the Polish-American Freedom Foundation and the Federation of Universities of the Third Age.

Between 2006 and 2010, almost half of the total number of still existing third age universities in Poland were formed (GUS, 2015). The sharp increase in the number of U3As after 2005 can be traced to the need for such institutions among an increasing group of older adults, as well as the founding of programmes (both governmental and non-governmental) with the objective of promoting the older adults movement. In 2007 alone, more were founded than in the entire first 25 years since the first such institution was set up. Moreover, they were now operating in various organizational and legal forms: as independent NGOs (usually associations), entities operating within the structures or under the patronage of higher education institutions, or units within local authority organizations (e.g. cultural centers, libraries, social welfare centers). U3As were established above all in large and medium-sized cities. Half of them operate in towns with up to 50,000 residents, although only around 11% of all universities for older adults are based in the countryside (GUS, 2015). At present, there are a total of 640 U3As in Poland (GUS, 2019a), whose main objective is improving the lives of older people by providing them with conditions for active aging.

In recent years, the tendency to create new centers of education for older adults of this type has slowed down. An initiative of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the National Center for Research and Development aims to counteract this trend. In 2018 these institutions announced the *Third Mission of Universities* competition, which made it possible to apply for funding of training programmes and teaching schemes, courses, and sessions, working with educational bodies such as local authority units or NGOs. The funds from the competition, amounting to 200 million PLN, have allowed universities to prepare special education programmes, courses, and training sessions aimed at people from outside of the academic community, including older adults. The objective of the programme is to forge relations between universities and their surroundings, popularize science, and support social development. This includes social and intellectual activation of older adults as well as prevention of social exclusion. Initiatives promoting formation of new universities of the third age, development of existing ones and encouraging people to participate in the

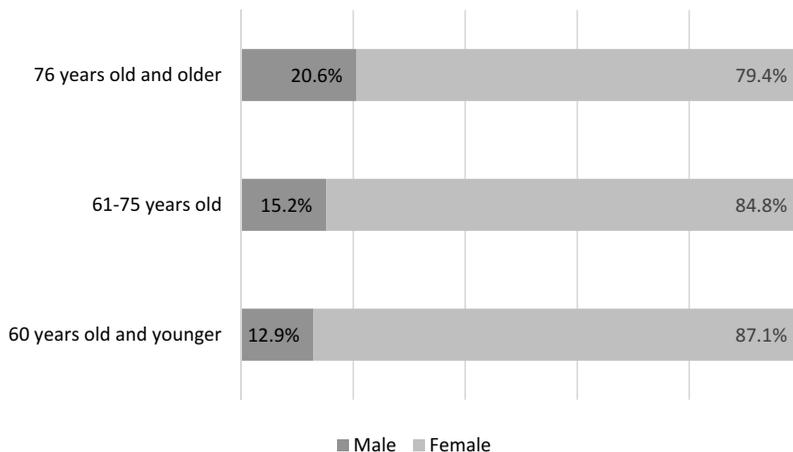
education they offer are especially important today, not least because the results of Statistics Poland's *Adult Education* study, which covered people aged between 18 and 69, showed that older people were characterized by a relatively low educational activity, measured by participation in formal and non-formal education and informal learning. Just 7.4% of people aged 60–69 participated in educational activity in the guise of non-formal education (GUS, 2018). In the 65–69 group, 20% of people participated in informal learning.

### U3As as adult education institutions

To become a U3A student, at most such institutions (86%), older adults must submit a participation declaration and/or pay a study fee (82%). Universities of the third age less often require students to be of a certain age (64%); where they do, the minimum age is usually 50 or 55 (47% and 33%, respectively, of the institutions with such a requirement). A condition concerning a specific level of education is stipulated by 20% of U3As, none of which requires students to have completed a university degree. Retired or pensioner status is used as a criterion for admission in just 47% of institutions (GUS, 2018).

In the 2014/2015 academic year, 96,000 older adults were studying at U3As. Women comprised the vast majority of U3A students (86%). The female domination (Chart 3) of education in later life might result from women's better psychophysical condition at this age, but also from Polish tradition, in which women congregate in various groupings such as housewives' associations and interest clubs. Men more often choose to spend time alone (e.g. fishing) or in smaller groups (chess, card games). It may also be harder for men to accept a hierarchical position in which they are students and somebody else is providing them with education.

The largest groups in terms of age are people aged between 60 and 70. Students aged over 70 comprise 26% of all participants, 11% of whom are over 75. The reason for this is the better psychophysical condition of younger students. People yet to reach the minimum retirement age, which in Poland is 65 for women and 67 for men, account for a similar percentage (12%). The reason for the low numbers of people in this age category might be the fact that they are still professionally active and consequently have less free time.



**Chart 3.** Students by sex and age at Universities of the Third Age in the 2017/18 academic year. Note. Chart 3 shows the female domination among U3A students. Source: based on GUS 2019.



**Chart 4.** Formal education of U3A students. Source: based on GUS 2016.

A further characteristic that distinguished U3A students was their formal education (Chart 4). Almost half of all students in the 2014/2015 academic year had completed secondary education. The lowest percentage comprised older adults with basic vocational or primary education. It is important to note, however, that 7% of U3As made secondary education a prerequisite during recruitment (GUS, 2016). This may also result from the fact that people with lower education often feel that they lack the necessary competences for studying, and also are not accustomed to acquiring new knowledge.

In 2018 there were a total of 113,200 students at all U3As in Poland, 95,400 of them women. Comparison with figures from 2014 shows that in the course of a few years, the number of older adults wishing to participate in U3A courses had grown (GUS, 2019a).

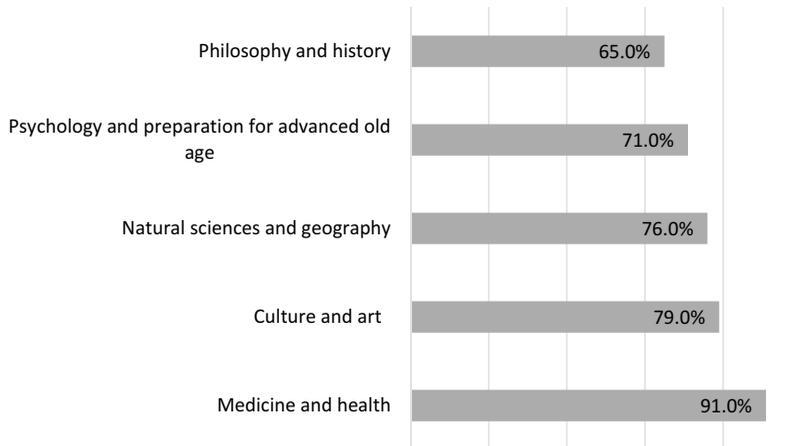
As the Statistics Poland data shows, when producing curricula, U3As mostly make use of the knowledge and experience of their management or instructors (74% of those studied). Half of U3As also respond to the needs of local older adults (51%) as well as the experiences of other U3As. Curricula are ultimately approved by the U3A board (48%) or management bodies (27%) (GUS, 2016).

The curricula of Polish U3As contain both typical university courses in the form of lectures, seminars, tutorials, workshops and labs, and less formalized forms such as interest clubs, physical activities, cultural, tourism, and special events, as well as counseling and joint trips (GUS, 2019a).

Of the U3As that participated in the statistical study in 2018 (GUS, 2019a), 575 offered educational lectures and seminars (Chart 5). Slightly fewer, 526, offered regular classes (Chart 6) including sporting and physical and artistic classes, language, and computer courses (GUS, 2019a).

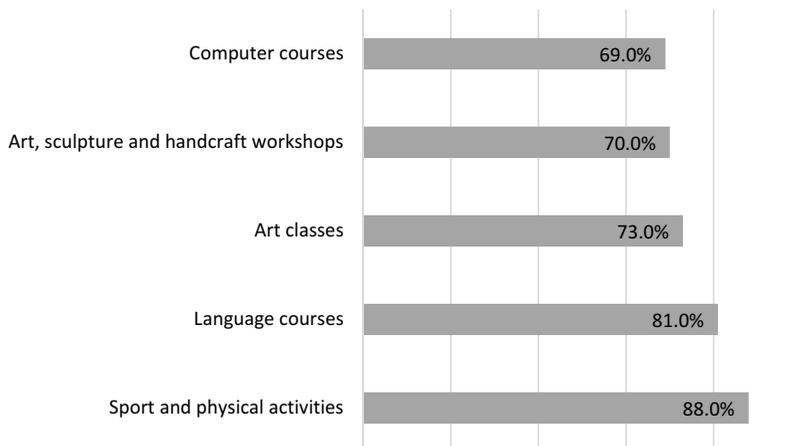
On average, one in three lectures is open to other people who are not U3A students (GUS, 2016).

The average attendance of students at regular courses nationwide was 63%, with nine institutions having a 100% attendance rate. Cultural and artistic events were offered by 550 universities, most popular among which were the trips, excursions, and city games organized by 98.8% of U3As as well as outings to the cinema, theater, museums, or other cultural institutions (92.1%). A rather different activity included in the mission of U3As was social



**Chart 5.** Universities of the Third Age by subjects of the most often organized lectures in the 2017/18 academic year.

*Note.* The bars in Chart 6 show the percentage of U3As that organized particular lectures. Source: based on GUS, 2019.



**Chart 6.** Universities of the Third Age by type of regular classes most often organized in the 2017/18 academic year. *Note.* The bars in Chart 6 show the percentage of U3As that organized particular regular classes. Source: based on GUS 2019.

campaigns on behalf of needy people not studying there; 285 of them engaged in such work. These initiatives mostly concerned older adults (67.7% of U3As), the local community (63.7%), and children and young people (52.3%) (GUS, 2019a).

## Discussion and conclusion – U3As are more than learning

In the middle of the previous century, it was even hard to imagine a discussion about the need to educate the older adults in Poland. Currently, it can be said that U3As in Poland have become not only a place of education activation of older adults. It is important to

remember that among the key factors affecting quality of life are intellectual activity and sense of belonging to a community. The work of these universities engages older sections of the population and has an affect on the socio-economic processes in which these people participate. Such institutions, therefore, contribute to:

- Satisfying needs related to self-education, spreading knowledge and skills, and revising new information technologies.
- Strengthening the social interaction network (satisfying the need for social contact).
- Activating participants in social life – playing the role of volunteer.
- Coping better with the psychological aspect of aging.
- Changing stereotypical thinking about age.

Poland could join the EU countries promoting education in late adulthood. According to Halina Szwarc, the founder of the Polish university of the third age movement, older adults' lifestyle and health are to a large extent affected by their educational level, as well as lifelong learning at a later age. Education and lifelong learning are not only an indispensable factor in health, but also a factor in maintaining a high quality of life until advanced old age (Szwarc, 1993). This is also confirmed by research which shows that significantly better fitness and better well-being can be noticed in the group of U3A students taking advantage of various forms of physical activity there (Wróblewska & Błaszczuk, 2010; Zasadzka, Trzmiel, Pochylska, Kropińska, & Pawlaczyk, 2017). Importantly, education in this age group allows people to understand the transformations in the contemporary world and to overcome difficulties. Undertaking various forms of activity is a proof that older adults can remain active in the intellectual and physical sphere and maintain positive social contacts.

The main idea behind the activity of third age universities is to engage older adults as well as to make use of them in the labor market by enabling them to share their knowledge, skills, and life experience. The older generations of Poles, who were young during or soon after the Second World War, were often forced to choose between education and defending their homeland. Because many opted for the latter, they did not always have the opportunity to expand their knowledge. U3As allow them to make up these deficits. They are also a meeting place for older adults, especially important in the context of loneliness of those who have lost spouses and close friends. Many such individuals are still fit and need an excuse to leave the home. Universities of the third age provide them with the opportunity to continually expand their knowledge, stimulate social activity, facilitate new acquaintances and help people to stay physically fit (Czerniawska, 1996). Older adults' free time, knowledge, life experience and desire to be active are all huge resources which can be put to excellent use and developed at third age universities.

The work of U3As in Poland is regulated by the Older Adults Act (Dz. U. [Journal of Laws], 2015), which specifies the terms for monitoring and presenting information on the situation of older adults, as well as the entities participating in these activities and sources of funding. The act concerns areas of information about the situation of older adults including cultural and educational as well as social and civic activity of older adults, which is included in the Polish state's policy on older adults. These four categories of activity are included in the mission of setting up and operating third age universities.

However, third age universities are also criticized for treating students as passive consumers of useless contents and failing to accomplish their mission to engage older people in

civic initiatives. The problem of inactivity of older adults in the process of organizing and developing educational models is particularly emphasized by the Age-Friendly University (AFU) movement. The AFU stakeholders have emphasized the importance of understanding older adults' needs and interests and the importance of community engagement (Hansen et al., 2019; Talmage, Hansen, Knopf, & Thaxton, 2018). Older adults must be involved in a collaborative effort to create educational programmes that meet their needs. Unfortunately, it happens that the institutions organizing U3As do not inform them about the existing resources for lifelong learning, and also do not innovate or update their resources in line with the needs and expectations of older adults. Meanwhile, as emphasized by the AFU, the institutions must be flexible and adaptable, although also demanding measurable outcomes of improvements in age-friendliness and access to lifelong learning (Finkelstein, 2018; Hansen et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, Polish U3As are not members of the Age-Friendly University (AFU). The AFU is an international network of higher education institutions that promote a friendly approach to the education of older adults, which is expressed in their programs and policies. Guided by the principles outlined in the 10 Age Friendly Principles, they enable institutions to learn about emerging adult-friendly activities and contribute to an education movement that brings social, personal, and economic benefits to students of all ages and universities. The activities of the AFU are based on such postulates as encouraging older adults to participate in all basic university activities, promoting their personal and professional development in the second half of life, recognizing, and responding to the extent of their educational needs, or promoting intergenerational learning to facilitate mutual knowledge sharing between learners at every age. A priority for the AFU's activities is also to involve retirees in the university community and to ensure dialogue with organizations representing the interests of the aging population. It is true that the AFU is also involved in education of older adults in the context of improving their professional qualifications, which differs from the U3A, whose task is to improve the quality of life through knowledge, not giving any diploma of qualification. Nevertheless, many of the goals set for the AFU and the U3A overlap. Polish U3As would probably benefit from joining the AFU, which would allow a more efficient flow of information on new trends in the education of older adults and the mutual sharing of experiences.

Critics of the U3A concept also accuse these institutions of elitism and recreating social inequalities, as well as lowering the prestige of universities through the activities of U3As without affiliation of universities and focusing on entertainment and recreational offer (Kobylarek, 2010). The elitism is related to the features of participants of the classes, who are often people with higher education. Yet, it is worth emphasizing that the Polish U3As do not impose any requirements on the level of education of the participants. Among students of the U3As, there are also many people without university degree. Thus, the impediment may be the psychological barrier inherent in the older adults themselves, resulting from their low self-esteem caused by low education level. However, they are active and reflective learners. With the prospect of extending human life, researchers face the important question to how to use the potential of older adults.

Another problem is the fact that despite the growing number of U3As in Poland, they still have fewer places than the number of those willing to participate in the classes. Although no detailed research has been done on this topic, the participants often complain about the lack of access to the activities of their interest due to the limited number of places available. The problems with satisfying these students' needs result not

only from the organizational deficiencies, but most of all from the underfunding of the U3As in Poland. Perhaps the form of membership fees is not optimal and some form of subsidies from the state budget should be considered. The fact that in the social group of older adults in Poland there is a great willingness to learn and acquire knowledge can be recognized as a positive aspect of this situation.

Despite all these limitations, the positive changes U3As deliver for older adults themselves and the local communities are inestimable. U3As often also become the basis for development of further older adults' organizations. Learning as an older adult is in many cases a path to fuller experience and better understanding of one's own life as well as constructing a new identity through interpretation of previous life experience (Czerniawska, 2007). It is also important in the process of popularization of preventive gerontology. U3A curricula include contents on healthcare and fulfilling the socio-psychological needs of older people (Szwarc, 1993). Universities for older adults counteract alienation among these groups, members of which frequently struggle to keep up with the changing reality, providing them with greater autonomy. Openness to lifelong education has a good influence on the quality of one's own old age.

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We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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