

University of the Second-and-a-Half Age: Literacies for the Twenty-First Century

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Topics: P2 - Role of key competencies in social inclusion and lifelong and lifewide learning systems policies, E5 - Personal and continuing professional development..., S3 - Encouragement of active citizenship, D1 - Providing the right competencies for the job market, D2 - Providing support for formal, non-formal and informal development, D8 - Professional competencies

Keywords: New literacies, University of the Third Age, Czech Republic, education programme development

Abstract

Since 1992, the University of the Third Age programmes (U3A) on numerous secondary and college-level education institutions in the Czech Republic are available to the citizens who reached the age of retirement. This form of education is very popular and much attended by the senior citizens.

The concept of the University of the Second and a Half Age (U2½A) is inspired by education model of the U3A. However, the target group of this model is the people older than 50 years, who are only approaching the Third Age, i.e. their retirement age.

Their role on the current Czech labour market is very difficult. Vast majority of them received their education in the socialist Czechoslovakia, a country where the public administration was responsible for creating enough work positions for everyone who was able of work, where Russian was the only state-imposed mandatory foreign language, and where any form of international cooperation and participation on the international labour market, especially involving Western democratic countries, were discouraged by the state policy. Consequently, many people felt no need to acquire career-building skills and sought no further education or training, formal or informal. When Czechoslovakia finally opened to the democratic world, many of these persons were still effectively cut off from people and information sources of the developed countries, since English and German languages became the principal means of international communication for the Czechoslovakia.

Due to these constraints, the rapid conversion of the Czechoslovakia, and later the Czech Republic to a Western democracy found many older people feeling unfit for the modern work culture that quickly established. Despite the current legal framework of the Czech Republic that outlaws the age discrimination, in reality it is usually these persons who would lose their jobs because of their lack of new skills. Instead of making good use of their experience and wisdom, the Czech society makes these people retire early. We believe that this, together with the aging of the population of the Czech Republic, leads to an unsustainable development.

The project “Literacies for the 21st Century” is our contribution to the global initiative of enhancing the general awareness of the new literacies (economic literacy, literacy for

sustainable development, civic literacy, and information literacy). Just as much it was normal that common people in the Czech Lands of 1800's were able to read and write, it must be normal that people of the 21st Century are aware of their civil rights, are able to process information, are able to manage their property, and understand the importance of the environmental protection.

“The Literacies for the 21st Century” is a project realized by the Centre of Education of the Liberec Region within the Operation Programme Human Resources Development, with the financial support of the European Social Fund. It is targeted to the tutors of life-long learning who are considered the future teachers at institutions that will provide the U2½A courses in the Liberec County in Northern Czech Republic.

The project includes establishing of the organization and audit mechanisms, authoring of the education program comprising of three specialized modules, authoring of the tutorial texts suitable for the elder citizens, development and maintenance of the project web site, development of the e-learning version of the tutorial texts, pilot training of the tutors (total of 60 people), evaluation of the pilot training, followed by fine-tuning or redevelopment of the tutorial texts and their e-learning version. The education program will be accredited by the Czech Ministry of Education.

As of now, 45 students – the future U2½A tutors – have completed the education programme successfully. The introduction to the new literacies has been presented in the opening of the programme, followed by training in communication skills and abilities to work with older people. Other lectures in the programme contained an introduction to the strategic documents of the EU and the Czech Republic (Lisbon Strategy of the European Union, National Strategy of the Human Resource Development, National Strategy of Sustainable Development, National Innovation Strategy, etc.), an introduction to the project management, and information design. They have been also trained in using the e-learning environment. The new tutors are ready to help improve the new literacies in persons of pre-retirement age. To conclude the project at the end of 2007, we plan to host a workshop where the experience gained during the project realization will be presented and discussed and where all successful students will be awarded certificates of the course completion.

Concurrently, the Centre of Education of the Liberec Region is preparing a project of the Academy of the Second-and-a-Half Age that will be a direct continuation of the current project. Several institutions of the primary and secondary education have been already appointed for cooperation. We expect a substantial interest from the members of the public to participate as students. This optimistic expectation is based on a previous experience of one of the authors of this paper:

The author of the project, Jaroslava B. Sporková, is also an author and a manager of a similar project, realized by the University of Economics and Public Administration in the city of Most, Czech Republic. Most is one of the Czech cities with very high unemployment rate. This project also aims towards the development of the new literacies, including the foreign language literacy. The first year of the project has been a success: The courses were held for 130% of the planned capacity of students. 80% students have successfully completed the education program, 60% students are interested in further education, and more than 50% students have recommended the programme to their relatives and friends. 60% students of this programme reported a great support by their families and friends. Most importantly, the courses are frequented by those who feel that their job situation is potentially endangered due

to their lack of knowledge and skills and those were the people that this project was meant to help.