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## **THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITIES OF THE THIRD AGE IN POLAND IN OVERCOMING SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

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Social exclusion is a social process that accompanies the development of a modern society. Modern society has a fairly realistic vision of a society consisting of more or less exclusive groups that prevent individualities from accessing these groups. They do it so as to maintain their own identity and hold the privilege to own what is regarded as valuable. Social exclusion in such a society is imminent and inevitable. However there is something that can be done to counteract, namely adult education. Social exclusion is accompanied by illiteracy and functional illiteracy. Functional illiteracy is particularly present in a number of European countries. It denotes the inability to use written word as a means of communication in typical everyday situations; despite the mastery of reading and writing, a functional illiterate does not possess the ability to understand written texts at the level necessary for the proper functioning in a modern world. In fact, such a person cannot study a simple text in an analytical and critical way in order to pick up essential facts. They do not understand information provided by the mass media; such a situation can be the cause of even more threatening social exclusion and marginalization. There are various forms of adult education. Rapidly growing European Universities of the Third Age are those, whose offer is most favourable. The author of this article claims that UTA stand for an opportunity to counteract illiteracy and social exclusion as well. The variety of forms of activity provided by UTA allows older people to access knowledge so that senior citizens would not be excluded and marginalized. What is

more, Universities of the Third Age help society to take the right attitude and to design the system of values. It all prevent intellectual pauperism and social exclusion.

*Keywords:* adult education, University of the Third Age, social exclusion, illiteracy

## **РОЛЬ УНИВЕРСИТЕТОВ ТРЕТЬЕГО ВОЗРАСТА В ПОЛЬШЕ В ПРЕОДОЛЕНИИ СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ ИЗОЛЯЦИИ**

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Социальная изоляция — процесс, сопровождающий развитие современного общества. Современное общество в реальности состоит из более или менее эксклюзивных групп, препятствующих индивидуальности проникнуть в них. Они делают это, чтобы сохранить самобытность и удержать привилегию владеть тем, что в обществе считается ценным. Социальная изоляция в таком обществе неизбежна. Однако есть то, что можно сделать, чтобы противодействовать этому, а именно образование для взрослых.

Социальная изоляция сопровождается неграмотностью и функциональной неграмотностью. Последняя особенно явно присутствует в ряде европейских стран. Это означает невозможность использования печатного слова как средства общения в типичных ситуациях повседневной жизни, на уровне, необходимом для нормального функционирования в современном мире. Такая ситуация может стать причиной еще более угрожающей социальной изоляции и маргинализации.

Существуют различные формы образования для взрослых. Быстро растущие европейские университеты третьего возраста (УТВ) являются наиболее благоприятными. Автор утверждает, что УТВ выступают за возможность противостоять неграмотности и социальной изоляции.

Разнообразие форм деятельности, предусмотренной УТВ, позволяет пожилым людям получать доступ к знаниям, так что пенсионеры не будут исключены из общества. Это предотвратит интеллектуальную нищету и социальную изоляцию.

*Ключевые слова:* образование для взрослых, университет третьего возраста, социальное отчуждение, неграмотность.

## **Introduction**

In the last two centuries we have witnessed rapid economic growth, which significantly affected the functioning of societies. The credit to that is given to both social and economic changes. The Industrial Revolution, as a process of technological, economic, social and cultural change that begun in the eighteenth century in England and Scotland, led to changes in the structure of society. From an agrarian society, living mainly in rural areas, an industrial society emerged, which mainly occupied rapidly growing cities. As a result of this process, socio-economic disparities increased. Intensified migrations from smaller towns and villages to larger towns took place. Migrations contributed to the dissemination of new patterns of social behaviour. Growing consumer needs arose as well. Yet, as it turned out, the migration movement did not manage to overcome some risks of social life such as poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, in some cases it became the source of new threats; some of them were the demographic crisis, the crisis of a monogamous family, moral relativism, terrorism, etc. People started seeking solutions aiming at reducing economic and social disparities. One of the methods was adult education. It strived for answers to questions about humans' existence and their entities in complex reality. The answers to these questions allow people to establish the style of life based on fundamental human rights, ensuing from natural law. Natural

law is the basis of evaluation systems. Properly structured lifestyle determines group membership, helps to identify units in a society and thus minimizes the effects of social inequality and exclusion. Lifelong learning of adults enables cognitive vulnerability that allows people to advance themselves personally and socially.

### **Illiteracy as the cause of social exclusion**

Intensive and long studies conducted by Z. Kwieciński and his research group have proven that social inequalities may be caused by the increasing interest of illiteracy. They show that illiteracy in cities went up, while in the countryside it slightly went down. Despite the figures, illiteracy is still more noticeable in rural areas. As Z. Kwieciński points out, "balance of the education community in poverty" is apparent.

The problem of illiteracy is not only a Polish problem, but global. According to data, in 1985 there were 889 million illiterate people at the age of 15 and older. They constituted nearly one third of the population in this age range. Asia and Africa are the regions where illiteracy is the most threatening. Much as illiteracy is the problem of developing countries, absolute illiteracy is rare in industrialized countries. However, a new phenomenon of illiteracy, that is to say functional illiteracy is noticeable. Functional illiterate people know alphabet and numbers, but their low level of knowledge and skills to prevent them from participating in social life in modern society characterized by constant changes. In some countries the percentage of these types of people range from a few to several percent. This phenomenon is also characteristic of many developed countries such as the United Kingdom.

Illiteracy, lack of elite in social and economic life and widespread poverty are phenomena, which are not conducive to reducing social equality, but they reinforce social exclusion. Only well educated, lifelong learning society can make a genuine democratization of life and fight successfully against the phenomena limiting social

inequalities and at the same time contributing to human development in social and economic life. If lifelong learning is properly supported by government programs and public finances, it may become a substantial factor for an economic growth, within the means of investing in human capital as the foundation of economic life.

### **Old age pensioners as the subject of UTA**

Pensioners comprise a group of people, who mainly take advantage of Universities of the Third Age. Senior citizens are liable to undergo more and more dynamic demographic changes. Population projections for the years 2008—2035 assume a positive change (increase) of birth rate only till 2013. In subsequent years a low birth rate is expected on account of adverse changes in the structure of population age and a decrease in the number of women of childbearing age. In 2035 the surplus of deaths over births will be close to 180 thousand. On one hand, it is a consequence of diminishing and very low birth rate observed in the 90's and at the edge of a new century, and the result of favourable changes in the mortality and life expectancy on the other.

Nowadays, the problem of the functioning of older people in a society is becoming more important. The reason for that is the progressive increase in the number of people who have reached retirement age. In 2004, the number of older age pensioners, that is to say of those who are over eighty years old, went up four times. It is anticipated that in 2020 the proportion of the elderly people will rise to 22.4 %, and in 2030 one third of the inhabitants of Poland will be 60 or older.

### **The role of the Third Age Universities**

One of the goals of Universities of the Third Age is the inclusion of older people in the system of lifelong learning. In 1982, the United Nations developed and issued “The Plan of Action for Older People”, in which it was firmly stated for the first time that there is a necessity for the elderly to access knowledge at different

levels (literacy campaign was launched) so that they would not be socially excluded or marginalized. In this way, the UN drew attention to the education of the elderly.

What is more, such a model of education had not been included in the process of education in many places of the world before. Outside school education was generally in favour of younger and middle-aged people. It had not been till only the Universities of the Third Age succeeded in including senior citizens in the process of learning, taking into account their health status and capabilities.

More and more retirees demonstrate their interest in education. They also look for a place at Polish Universities of the Third Age. Those Universities constitute an international movement encouraging older people to continue learning throughout their lives and enable them to spend time in a peer group.

Older people have gained educational experience based on the curricula designed especially for them. Before the foundation of UTA, various alternations of curricula had been broadened on continents like Europe, Asia and North America.

Older people participated in many programmes organized by governments, unions, and private entrepreneurs in America, already in the mid 50's of the previous century. The training took place both at universities, public schools and as correspondence courses. In Australia and New Zealand senior citizen education started in earnest in the mid 80's. In Japan, classes for seniors begun in the 60's, and since 1980 courses included in numerous educational programs for the elderly have been offered. On top of that, the government supported enterprises for training the elderly such as education at Senior Citizens Colleges run by welfare centres.

In South Korea programmes for the elderly have been running since 1972, in Singapore it been done since the mid 80's. In Sweden, Finland and Denmark senior education is held at folk high schools. Finland runs Seniors Academies and with folk high schools. It also prepares people for retirement in weekly courses. Preparing for retirement is also a matter of other institutions (like Central League for the Protection

of the Elderly in the 80's). In Denmark, the first university for pensioners was founded in 1971. However, the first UTA in Europe was erected in France in Toulouse, in 1973 by Pierre Vellas (Professor of International Law at the University of Toulouse). In the beginning the previous decade, more than half a million of people were students of UTA.

In Poland there are currently over 380 Universities of the Third Age, bringing together tens of thousands of students. Poland was the third country in the world (behind France and Belgium), in which the movement of UTA was initiated. The first UTA in Poland started at the same time as the one in Switzerland, Italy and Canada, that is in 1975. The announcement made in 2012, stating that this year is of the Universities of the Third Age only emphasizes its phenomena; along with the UTA Congress held in March 2012.

Both, willingness to overcome difficulties and learning ability strengthen the role of educational activity of the elderly. Educational needs that have not been met earlier, can be fulfilled when retired.

Socially active retirees often have their own plan of development for the coming years. Expanding knowledge and activity prevent seniors' mental well-being from deterioration, as it might happen with their physical condition. This helps to establish and maintain relationships that are not confined only to a family or surrounding neighbourhood. What is more, the goal of such behaviour is not only self-advancement or satisfying personal needs; it is also aims at others and their needs. With this kind of approach, retirees are able to overcome social exclusion and become creative members of society.

## **Conclusion**

The involvement of older people in UTA actions foster activity and creativity in a society. A person, who has been motivated and who has expanded their knowledge at UTA, is able to counteract social exclusion successfully. Such people are driven by

a proactive approach to meet their and others' needs, and to be a fulfilled and content person. It is important that the effects of human activity serve the purpose of overcoming various difficulties and problems of old age such as loneliness and loss of health. Society should help older people to be active and satisfied with life. The elderly should be provided with opportunities to fulfil themselves. The pursuit of true humanity cannot be based on individualism and isolation only. It should be built on a sense of solidarity and bond with community. Such "Autumn of life", which can be experienced by senior citizens, is proposed by rapidly growing Universities of the Third Age.

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