

UNIVERSITIES OF THE THIRD AGE AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN LIFELONG
LEARNING AND SOCIAL POLICY: INSIGHTS FROM THE CZECH CONTEXT

UNIVERSIDADES DA TERCEIRA IDADE COMO PONTE ENTRE A EDUCAÇÃO AO
LONGO DA VIDA E A POLÍTICA SOCIAL: PERSPECTIVAS DO CONTEXTO
TCHECO

UNIVERSIDADES DE LA TERCERA EDAD COMO PUENTE ENTRE EL
APRENDIZAJE A LO LARGO DE LA VIDA Y LA POLÍTICA SOCIAL:
PERSPECTIVAS DEL CONTEXTO CHECO



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ABSTRACT: Population ageing is transforming education and social policy across Europe. This study examines the role of Universities of the Third Age as spaces that connect lifelong learning with social participation among older adults. Quantitative and qualitative data from 135 participants were analysed to explore motivation, perceived benefits, and barriers to participation. The results show that later-life education supports cognitive activation, emotional well-being, and social connectedness, while fostering a sense of purpose and community belonging. However, participation in civic or policy-related activities remains limited, indicating the need for stronger institutional and policy support. The discussion situates these findings within current European and Czech debates on active ageing and lifelong learning. The study suggests that education in later life can serve as a form of social innovation, contributing to inclusion, empowerment, and intergenerational solidarity in an ageing society.

KEYWORDS: Lifelong learning. Active aging. University of the Third Age. Social policy.

RESUMO: O envelhecimento populacional está transformando a educação e as políticas sociais em toda a Europa. Este estudo analisa o papel das Universidades da Terceira Idade como espaços que conectam a aprendizagem ao longo da vida à participação social de pessoas idosas. Foram analisados dados quantitativos e qualitativos de 135 participantes, a fim de explorar motivações, benefícios percebidos e barreiras à participação. Os resultados indicam que a educação na velhice promove ativação cognitiva, bem-estar emocional e vínculos sociais, além de fortalecer o sentido de propósito e pertencimento comunitário. No entanto, a participação em atividades cívicas ou políticas ainda é limitada, o que sugere a necessidade de maior apoio institucional e político. A discussão situa esses achados nos debates europeus e tchecos atuais sobre envelhecimento ativo e aprendizagem ao longo da vida, sugerindo que a educação em idades avançadas pode funcionar como uma forma de inovação social e de fortalecimento da solidariedade intergeracional.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Aprendizagem ao longo da vida. Envelhecimento ativo. Universidade da Terceira Idade. Política social.

RESUMEN: El envejecimiento poblacional está transformando la educación y las políticas sociales en toda Europa. Este estudio examina el papel de las Universidades de la Tercera Edad como espacios que vinculan el aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida con la participación social de las personas mayores. Se analizaron datos cuantitativos y cualitativos de 135 participantes para explorar motivaciones, beneficios percibidos y barreras a la participación. Los resultados muestran que la educación en la vejez favorece la activación cognitiva, el bienestar emocional y la conexión social, fortaleciendo al mismo tiempo el sentido de propósito y pertenencia comunitaria. Sin embargo, la participación en actividades cívicas o políticas sigue siendo limitada, lo que revela la necesidad de un mayor apoyo institucional y político. La discusión sitúa estos hallazgos en los debates europeos y checos actuales sobre el envejecimiento activo y el aprendizaje permanente, y sugiere que la educación en edades avanzadas puede funcionar como una forma de innovación social y de fortalecimiento de la solidaridad intergeneracional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Aprendizaje permanente. Envejecimiento activo. Universidad de la Tercera Edad. Política social.

INTRODUCTION

Population ageing is reshaping the social, educational, and policy landscapes of contemporary societies. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the global population aged 60 and over surpassed one billion in 2019 and is projected to reach 2.1 billion by 2050. In response, the WHO launched the Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030 (WHO, 2021), later endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly, with the aim of creating environments that promote functional ability, social participation, and dignity in later life. Within this framework, education is increasingly viewed as essential for maintaining autonomy, participation, and cognitive vitality across the life course.

In the European context, lifelong learning has become a cornerstone of social and educational policy. The European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021–2030 emphasizes inclusive access to learning opportunities across formal, non-formal, and informal settings, aiming to reduce inequalities and strengthen social participation. Complementary initiatives promote flexible pathways, guidance systems, and recognition of prior learning to support adults' active contribution to society (European Association for the Education of Adults, 2021; European Commission, 2024).

Against this policy backdrop, the Universities of the Third Age (U3A) have emerged as a distinctive arena where education and social engagement intersect. Comparative research describes their evolution from volunteer-based community initiatives to institutionally anchored programs embedded in the landscape of lifelong education (Formosa, 2019). These programs invite older adults not only to learn but also to share lived experience and foster intergenerational dialogue. Such practices may represent a form of social innovation, reinforcing the notion of education as both a personal and collective resource.

Yet a conceptual gap remains. Much research has focused on individual well-being outcomes, while the potential of these programs to influence social policy, service design, and community development has been less examined. This study addresses that gap by exploring how older adults perceive their learning and life trajectories and how these perceptions may inform educational and social practices. The analysis seeks to connect micro-level experiences with macro-level implications for policy, offering insight into the co-creative role of seniors within an inclusive and ageing society.

While the policy discourse on active and healthy ageing provides a clear normative framework, its translation into educational practice remains uneven. The commitment to lifelong learning often meets structural and cultural barriers that limit participation, particularly

among older adults with lower educational backgrounds or limited access to institutional programs. In this context, the U3A occupy a unique position, serving as both an educational setting and a social innovation mechanism. Their significance extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge, encompassing processes of identity reconstruction, empowerment, and community participation. To understand these dynamics, it is essential to examine how lifelong learning and social engagement are interconnected in later life, and how these relationships are theorized and empirically supported in current scholarship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing proportion of older adults has begun to reshape welfare systems, particularly in the fields of social services and education (Rupavijetra et al., 2022; Stárek, 2025). This demographic transition highlights not only the need to understand material and health-related conditions in later life but also the ways in which community-based services influence older adults' willingness to participate in forms of shared or socialized care (Barbaccia et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2024). Some studies indicate that higher levels of education and personal income may foster such participation, whereas living arrangements and poorer self-rated health tend to reduce it (Casanova et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2024). These relationships, while statistically significant, could obscure the subjective meanings that older adults assign to their experiences. Psychosocial perspectives on active ageing, derived from personal learning and participation, appear equally essential to understanding later-life engagement (Choi & Cho, 2021; Gierszewski & Kluzowicz, 2021).

Programs such as the U3A have become emblematic of these dynamics. Research suggests that participation in U3A courses strengthens autonomy, personal growth, and social connectedness while enhancing life satisfaction (Chen & Wang, 2016; Ordonez et al., 2011; Zeki Al Hazzouri et al., 2021). Although the evidence is largely positive, access to these programs remains unequal. The concept of active longevity underscores the wider economic and socio-cultural benefits of educational participation, yet the distribution of these benefits across social strata appears uneven (Anikeeva et al., 2021; Cuyvers et al., 2018; Patterson et al., 2016). Lifelong learning thus functions not only as an individual resource but also as a social mechanism enabling older adults to shape their environments and pursue new aspirations (Veteška, 2024).

Educational participation in later life has also been interpreted as part of a broader vision of a learning society, where the knowledge and experiences of older individuals are reinvested in their communities, often through intergenerational interaction (Zhang et al., 2022). This perspective challenges traditional portrayals of ageing as decline and invites a reframing of later life as a stage of active intellectual and social engagement. Still, such optimism may overlook structural inequalities. The availability of affordable programs, the accessibility of healthcare, and prevailing cultural attitudes toward ageing all shape whether older adults can participate meaningfully (Huang et al., 2024). When supportive conditions are in place, learning and social participation reinforce each other, promoting resilience and psychological well-being (Choi & Cho, 2021; Lak et al., 2021).

Empirical evidence also links educational involvement to health-related outcomes. Participation in structured learning has been associated with improved cognitive functioning, higher life satisfaction, and better perceived health (Díaz-López et al., 2017; Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2008). However, many of these findings rely on self-reported data, which may limit generalizability. Other research suggests that continued learning mitigates cognitive decline and strengthens social engagement, thereby supporting active ageing policies (Kalenda & Kočvarová, 2022). Overall, the literature points to a reciprocal relationship between education, health, and social connectedness, even though the intensity of these links varies by context.

While international research has advanced these debates, similar issues have surfaced in Central and Eastern Europe, where the development of later-life education followed a distinctive trajectory. In the Czech Republic, the U3A constitute one of the most visible and structured forms of senior education. Originating from Czechoslovak Red Cross initiatives in the 1970s, these programs have since expanded to nearly all major universities (Šerák, 2009). Initially conceived as leisure-oriented, they have gradually evolved to fulfill wider social and pedagogical roles. Empirical studies indicate that U3A programs enhance recognition of older adults' life experiences and foster intergenerational dialogue (Špatenková, 2016). In practice, they may reduce loneliness and promote autonomy in old age (Halířová, 2018).

Czech scholars have increasingly emphasized the participatory potential of seniors in shaping social and educational services. Havlíková and Sýkorová (2019) argue that older adults should be regarded not only as recipients of care but also as active contributors whose lived experience can inform more responsive social policy. From a pedagogical standpoint, Mühlpachr (2014) calls for the systematic development of gerontopedagogy, an underexplored

discipline that could provide a framework for integrating senior education into broader lifelong learning strategies.

Taken together, international and Czech scholarship converge on the notion that later-life education, and particularly the U3A model, represents more than intellectual enrichment. It provides a pathway for older adults to reinforce their social roles, contribute to community development, and participate in shaping the services that affect their lives. What remains to be explored is the inclusiveness of these opportunities across diverse social groups and the extent to which they can influence institutional practices at both local and national levels.

METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine how older adults participating in Universities of the Third Age perceive and apply their life experiences in educational and community contexts. A sequential explanatory design was adopted (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative data provided an initial overview of participants' perceptions and engagement patterns, followed by qualitative analysis aimed at deepening the interpretation of the identified trends. The sample size was considered sufficient for an exploratory analysis of experiential and participatory dimensions within the U3A population.

Participants

The sample consisted of 135 older adults aged between 60 and 82 years who were enrolled in U3A programs at major Czech universities during the 2023–2024 academic year. Participants were recruited through institutional mailing lists and voluntarily completed an anonymous questionnaire. Approximately 78% were women and 22% men, reflecting the typical gender distribution within U3A enrolment (Formosa, 2019). All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection.

Data Collection

Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire consisting of three sections:

- (1) demographic and socioeconomic background;
- (2) motivations for joining U3A; and

(3) perceived personal and social impacts of participation.

The instrument combined closed-ended Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was adapted from prior validated instruments used in studies on lifelong learning and aging (Narushima et al., 2016, 2018).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was processed using standard analytical tools available within Microsoft Office and LibreOffice environments. Basic descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were applied to summarize participants' demographic profiles and principal variables related to educational engagement, motivation, and perceived social benefits. Cross-tabulation functions were used to explore relationships between selected variables, particularly education level and perceived impact on social connectedness. Visualization tools were employed to produce comparative tables and charts that facilitated interpretation and transparency.

Qualitative data were examined through a structured thematic analysis inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework. This process included repeated reading of the responses, generation of initial codes, identification of potential themes, and refinement of these themes through comparison and synthesis. Coding was conducted manually to maintain proximity to the participants' meanings, allowing interpretative sensitivity to the context of each statement. To enhance the credibility of interpretation, two independent researchers reviewed the emerging themes, followed by a consensus discussion that ensured conceptual coherence and inter-rater reliability.

Data validation involved several procedural safeguards. Quantitative data were checked for completeness, missing values, and inconsistencies through built-in spreadsheet functions. Qualitative material was anonymized prior to analysis, and all responses were cross-verified against the raw dataset. Triangulation was achieved by comparing quantitative trends with qualitative insights, ensuring that the interpretations reflected both numerical patterns and participants lived experiences. Together, these steps provided methodological rigor while maintaining accessibility and transparency without the use of specialized proprietary software.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013) and the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2017). Given the non-invasive and anonymous nature of the study, formal approval from an institutional ethics committee was not required under national and institutional guidelines. All participants were informed about the aims and voluntary nature of the study before data collection. Written consent was obtained electronically, and participants were assured that they could withdraw their responses at any time without consequence.

Data were treated with strict confidentiality and stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the research team. No identifying information was collected, and all qualitative responses were anonymized prior to analysis. The study design complied with the General Data Protection Regulation (EU Regulation 2016/679), ensuring the protection of participants' privacy and personal data.

RESULTS

The analysis included responses from 135 participants aged 60 to 82 years. The findings show that participation in the U3A was most frequently perceived as an opportunity for intellectual enrichment, personal fulfilment, and social connectedness. A strong majority of respondents reported that their involvement in U3A activities stimulated curiosity, strengthened motivation, and encouraged a sense of purpose in everyday life.

As shown in Table 1, approximately 74% of respondents reported an increase in motivation and curiosity for continued learning. Around 67% indicated that U3A encouraged them to share their life experience with others, most often through volunteering, mentoring, or intergenerational exchange. More than half (58%) identified the possibility to apply acquired knowledge in educational or counselling activities, while 46% referred to participation in cultural or artistic events.

Lower levels of engagement were found in the areas of community initiatives (29%) and civic or policy activities (12%), suggesting that formal participation in public decision-making remains limited. About 15% of respondents mentioned barriers to regular participation, primarily related to health problems, transportation, or limited access to digital technologies. Qualitative responses further revealed that the majority of participants perceived U3A as a safe and stimulating environment that enhanced optimism, strengthened self-confidence, and

reduced social isolation. Respondents often described their participation as a source of renewed energy and emotional stability.

Overall, the data indicate that involvement in U3A contributes to several dimensions of well-being (cognitive, emotional, and social) while also supporting active engagement in later life. However, the relatively low representation of structural or civic participation highlights an ongoing need for stronger connections between educational programs, community initiatives, and local policy frameworks.

Table 1.

Self-Reported Outcomes and Engagement Patterns Related to Participation in the Universities of the Third Age

Category	Percentage (%)
Increased motivation and curiosity	74
Willingness to share life experiences	67
Application of knowledge in education/counselling	58
Participation in cultural or artistic events	46
Involvement in community/social initiatives	29
Engagement in civic or policy activities	12
Reported barriers to participation	15

Note. Prepared by the authors.

In the second part of the analysis, participants were asked to identify the primary motivations for enrolling in U3A programs and the main perceived benefits after completion. The results reveal clear trends in both areas.

The dominant motivation for participation was personal interest in learning new subjects (82%), followed by the desire to remain mentally active (76%) and to meet new people (68%). A smaller proportion of respondents referred to the search for self-confidence or a new social role after retirement (41%). Only a minority indicated external encouragement by family members or friends (18%), suggesting that participation is primarily self-driven.

Regarding perceived benefits, respondents most frequently mentioned intellectual stimulation (79%) and improved mood or psychological balance (72%). Social belonging and the feeling of being part of a learning community were highlighted by 63% of participants. Approximately 38% reported that the program had a positive impact on their health-related behaviour, such as increased physical activity or interest in preventive care.

The summary of these findings is presented in Table 2 and Table 3, which compares the most frequent motivations and benefits reported by respondents.

Table 2.*Self-Reported Motivations for Participation in the Universities of the Third Age*

Category	Percentage (%)
Interest in learning new subjects	82
Desire to stay mentally active	76
Meeting new people and social interaction	68
Search for new social role or self-confidence	41
Encouragement from family/friends	18

Note. Prepared by the authors.

Table 3.*Self-Reported Benefits of Participation in the Universities of the Third Age*

Category	Percentage (%)
Intellectual stimulation and cognitive activation	79
Improved mood and emotional balance	72
Sense of belonging and social connectedness	63
Health-related behaviour and lifestyle change	38

Note. Prepared by the authors.

The results confirm that U3A participation is primarily motivated by internal factors such as curiosity and personal growth rather than external incentives. The perceived benefits extend beyond intellectual development to include psychosocial and lifestyle dimensions. While the emphasis remains on personal enrichment, the responses also reveal potential for community-based impact through shared learning and sustained social participation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that participation in U3A may enhance psychological well-being, cognitive activation, and social connectedness among older adults. These outcomes are consistent with international evidence suggesting that educational engagement promotes autonomy, self-efficacy, and social participation in later life (Ordonez et al., 2011; Zeki Al Hazzouri et al., 2021). Recognising and supporting diverse forms of human potential within may inform the design of educational programmes that are more inclusive and responsive to individual needs (Daněk, 2024). The data also show that older adults' motivations are largely intrinsic, driven by curiosity and the need for meaningful activity, which resonates with theories of self-determination and lifelong learning (Kalenda & Kočvarová, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2012).

The relatively low levels of participation in civic or policy-related activities may, however, indicate that institutional and cultural barriers persist. Limited accessibility, health concerns, and inadequate digital skills can constrain older adults' involvement in more formal or collective domains of engagement (Huang et al., 2024; Veteška, 2024). This pattern suggests

that U3A programs, while effective in promoting individual growth, may still fall short in fostering structural empowerment. From a policy perspective, this aligns with critiques emphasizing that active ageing frameworks often privilege personal responsibility over systemic support. Research on social reintegration highlights that structured support systems play a crucial role in facilitating individual agency and community belonging, suggesting that educational and social initiatives can similarly support older adults in navigating transitions across life stages (Daněk, 2022; Vlach & Stárek, 2025).

The Czech context adds a valuable dimension to these debates. Although U3A programs have become well established and widely attended, their integration into broader lifelong learning and social policy remains limited. Gerontopedagogical approaches proposed by Mühlpachr (2014) highlight the need for more systematic incorporation of senior education into the national education strategy, including recognition of informal learning and intergenerational exchange. Czech research further suggests that senior participants possess significant potential to contribute to community development and social innovation if provided with adequate institutional channels (Havlíková & Sýkorová, 2019; Špatenková, 2016).

In this sense, U3A may serve as a microcosm of a learning society, where older adults' accumulated knowledge and social capital could be mobilized for community benefit. However, realizing this potential requires not only pedagogical but also managerial innovation within universities and municipalities. Closer cooperation between academic institutions, local governments, and social service organizations could transform these programs from isolated educational activities into active components of social policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

U3A represents a growing yet insufficiently systematised component of lifelong learning and social policy. Despite their demonstrated educational and social benefits, their role remains only partially embedded in national policy frameworks and institutional strategies. The following recommendations outline key directions for strengthening U3A as an inclusive, evidence-informed, and socially responsive educational model.

Institutional anchoring of U3A within lifelong learning and social policy frameworks

U3A should be explicitly integrated into national lifelong learning strategies as a constitutive component of education across the life course. Formal recognition must be

accompanied by stable funding mechanisms that ensure accessibility for socially and economically diverse groups of older adults, thereby reinforcing the preventive and inclusion-oriented functions of later-life education.

Development of intersectoral and participatory models of provision

Effective U3A provision requires systematic cooperation between universities, municipalities, and non-profit organisations, linking educational activities with health, social, and community-based services. Programmes should be designed using participatory approaches that actively involve older adults in co-creating learning content and community initiatives, strengthening empowerment, agency, and social cohesion.

Digital inclusion and evidence-based quality assurance

Digital literacy should become a standard and integral element of U3A curricula in order to reduce participation barriers and support meaningful online engagement among seniors. At the same time, continuous, evidence-based evaluation of cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes is essential to inform policy development, guide resource allocation, and enhance the overall effectiveness of U3A as a platform for educational and social innovation.

Adopted collectively, these measures may consolidate the dual educational and social role of Universities of the Third Age and support a broader shift in public discourse, reframing ageing as an active phase of learning, participation, and civic contribution rather than decline.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study contributes to the growing body of research that views education in later life as an integral dimension of social policy rather than an isolated leisure activity. The findings indicate that participation in U3A enhances motivation, psychological well-being, and social connectedness among older adults. These outcomes suggest that learning in later life should be interpreted not only as a means of maintaining cognitive vitality but also as a vehicle for personal agency and community engagement.

At the same time, the data reveals a persistent gap between individual and structural empowerment. While most participants experience significant personal benefits, opportunities

to engage in civic, community, or policy-related activities remain limited. This imbalance may reflect broader societal tendencies to individualize aging, leaving collective dimensions of participation underdeveloped.

From an educational policy perspective, the results underscore the need to integrate senior education into national and regional strategies for lifelong learning. Doing so would position older adults as active contributors to knowledge-based societies rather than passive recipients of care. Universities, municipalities, and community organizations should thus collaborate in creating accessible and inclusive learning environments that acknowledge the diversity of senior learners and their potential to shape social innovation.

Future research could deepen this inquiry by exploring longitudinal effects of U3A participation on well-being, community involvement, and local development. Mixed-method approaches may be particularly valuable for capturing how educational experiences evolve over time and interact with broader social changes.

Ultimately, the Universities of the Third Age represent a bridge between education and social policy, a bridge that, if strengthened through thoughtful governance and inclusive design, could help societies face the demographic realities of the 21st century with dignity, participation, and a renewed sense of shared learning.

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