

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF UNIVERSITIES OF THE THIRD AGE TO SENIOR CITIZENS' QUALITY OF LIFE

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**Abstract:** *U3A courses are intended for people no longer in full time employment. The concept was first developed in France in the early 1970s. Masaryk University has been organizing U3A courses since 1990. In order to qualify for a U3A course, applicants must be retired and have A levels. Various analyses of the motives and the rising interest in studies indicate that the courses increase the quality of life of the senior citizens involved. This paper aims to interpret the results of our survey as well as thoroughly discussing the motives and reasons leading senior citizens to participate in U3A courses. A comparison drawn between our results and other scientific studies points to the conclusion that U3A courses present an agreeable and dignified means of sustaining a reasonable quality of life for a part of the elderly population. Among other benefits, senior citizens appreciate the opportunity to actively engage in social life, create new social relations and participate in voluntary work.*

**Keywords:** *quality of life, university of the third age, seniors' motivation in education*

Quality of life is universally accepted as comprising a multidimensional phenomenon. From an individual's point of view, the term is first and foremost a personal and subjective one, closely linked to notions of well-being and mental health. It is linked to both physical and mental activity throughout the stages of an individual's life while also associated with existing or potential work activity. Last but not least, it is constantly influenced by an individual's integration in society, his/her social standing and place in the immediate family as well as a wider social context.

In recent years, more and more attention has been devoted to issues surrounding the quality of life of senior citizens. This is associated with the rising life expectancy in the Euro-Atlantic cultural space. As noted by Vaďurová (2005), quality of life (QOL) has proven to be an extremely difficult term to define with the corresponding measuring methodology being no less challenging. She considers quality of life a key area in research focusing on the behavioural and social aspects of the life of the elderly.

The quality of life of senior citizens is influenced by a number of factors, among

them e.g. health, lifestyle, social surroundings, available material means, work activity, medical care, social services, accommodation, education, ethical principles applied in society, etc.

A number of documents deal with issues associated with sustaining the quality of life of senior citizens: the International Plan of Action on Ageing (Vienna 1982), UN Principles for Older Persons (1991) and the International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002) from the Second World Assembly on Ageing (Madrid 2002).

These are mirrored in a document published by the Government of the Czech Republic entitled “National Programme of Preparation for Ageing for 2003–2007”. The document lists measures in support of ensuring a high-quality and dignified ageing environment as well as senior citizens’ active participation in social life. The Programme of the Government of the Czech Republic includes the following suggestions in the area of education:

- Promoting the implementation of the lifelong learning concept according to the “*National Program for the Development of Education*”, “Long-term Plan for the Development of Education” and within the framework of the “Memorandum on Lifelong Learning”,
- Preparing the “Concept for lifelong learning”, supporting lifelong learning development programmes,
- Supporting the establishment of universities of the third age (U3A) as well as developing their educational programmes,
- Supporting the formation of “academies of the third age” on national, regional and local levels,
- Supporting the establishment of “Educational Centres” and ensuring access for senior citizens,
- Participating in the integration of the Czech Republic into European as well as world-wide structures dealing with the education of senior citizens (AIUTA, LiLL, EFOS, EURAG),
- Creating educational, informative and retraining programmes for senior citizens,
- Raising senior citizens’ awareness of educational opportunities and forms.

Providing persons no longer in full time employment with lifelong learning opportunities is one of the key goals defined therein.

The education of senior citizens may be said to encompass a number of important functions. It contributes to a sense of dignity, helps preserve an individual’s knowledge base and contributes to maintaining one’s place in society. It exerts positive influence on the senium, helps adapt to lifestyle changes and contributes to preserving one’s physical and mental energy. Participating in educational activities may be one of the factors in attaining the so-called wisdom of old age.

In operational terms, quality of life is defined by means of the content of questionnaires used in expert studies on the quality of life, as mentioned by Vaďurová (2005). One of the possible techniques of structuring the areas falling under the comprehensive umbrella term of quality of life is subdividing them into e.g. the following categories: existence, i.e. the physical aspect, the mental aspect, fellowship, i.e. a sense of place

among fellow citizens and in society, and adaptability, i.e. daily life, leisure time, plans for the future.

The leading position among the various forms of senior citizen education in the Czech Republic is currently occupied by universities of the third age. While the notion was first implemented in France in the 1970s, Masaryk University has been organizing such courses since 1990. In order to qualify for enrolment in a U3A course, applicants must be retired as well as being at least secondary school graduates with completed A levels. Analyses of the motives and rising interest in studies indicate that the courses contribute to increasing the quality of life of the senior citizens involved.

A comparison between the findings established in our research and in similar studies allows us to conclude that – at least for some of the elderly population – U3A courses comprise a means of maintaining the quality of life of senior citizens in an agreeable and dignified manner. A sense of participation in social life and various events, acquiring new contacts and the option of taking part in voluntary tasks are also considered important.

Analyses of the makeup of U3A participants have repeatedly confirmed that more interest is generally generated among women than men and that people with backgrounds requiring lifelong education, e.g. primary and secondary school teachers, medical doctors, public administration officials, etc. are more likely to enrol.

There are at least two reasons for assessing the motivation for studies in U3A courses:

- a) on a general level, such an assessment comprises a report on (a part of) the current senior population,
- b) on a course organization level, the findings may contribute to reaching an agreement between the existing offer on the part of the institution in question and demand on the part of course participants.

The survey presented here was conducted among a group of first-year U3A participants in courses organized by Masaryk University in the 2006/2007 academic year prior to the beginning of instruction. The results presented here are relevant to the motivation for attending such courses. They are part of a wider research scheme which is conducted regularly and includes – among other things – an assessment of the courses as such as well as an evaluation of individual lectures.

Method: A pilot study, consisting of guided interviews with course participants, was used to define a total of 11 possible positive study motives. Respondents were asked to rate these on a five-point Likert scale. The individual points were labelled as follows: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree.

This scale was chosen for a number of pragmatic and practical reasons, with full awareness of the potential distortion which may occur when this method is utilized.

Unlike in the case of open-ended questions, the results thus allocated to scales are relatively easy to quantify and subsequently facilitate meaningful computer processing. Senior citizens were likewise able to indicate their answers without any difficulty. Of the 143 questionnaires administered, 11 were eliminated due to incomplete data; the results are thus based on a sample comprising 132 individuals. The analysis took place in October 2006, i.e. at the beginning of course instruction; the questionnaire was distributed at the end of the lecture and handed in on completion by individual respondents.

Results: The individual points were each allocated a value: strongly agree – 1, agree – 2, neither agree nor disagree – 3, disagree – 4, strongly disagree – 5. The closer the mean value is to 1, the stronger the motivation.

An example of one of the 11 motives in question is listed in table No. 1 detailing the frequency of occurrence of the individual points with respect to the desire to maintain and improve knowledge in one’s field of professional expertise.

Mean, median (numeric value separating the higher half of a sample from the lower half) and mode (most frequently occurring value) were calculated for all motives. These level characteristics respect all possible point values, both positive and negative.

The most cited motive was “[the desire to] acquire new knowledge and information” (mean of 1.14) while acquiring a certificate formed the weakest study incentive (4.08). A comparison of the motives relevant to maintaining and improving one’s knowledge yielded some interesting results: while maintaining and improving knowledge in one’s field of interest reached a mean of 1.30, maintaining and improving knowledge in one’s field of professional expertise ranked among the weaker motivating factors with a mean of 2.69.

**Table No. 1:** *Absolute and relative frequencies of motive assessment points: maintaining and improving knowledge in one’s field of professional expertise*

motive assessment points	frequency	relative frequency	cumulative frequency
strongly agree	35	26.5	26.5
agree	42	31.8	58.3
neither agree nor disagree	7	5.3	63.6
disagree	25	18.9	82.6
strongly disagree	23	17.4	100
total	132	100	

**Table No. 2:** *Numeric characteristics of the intensity of individual motives*

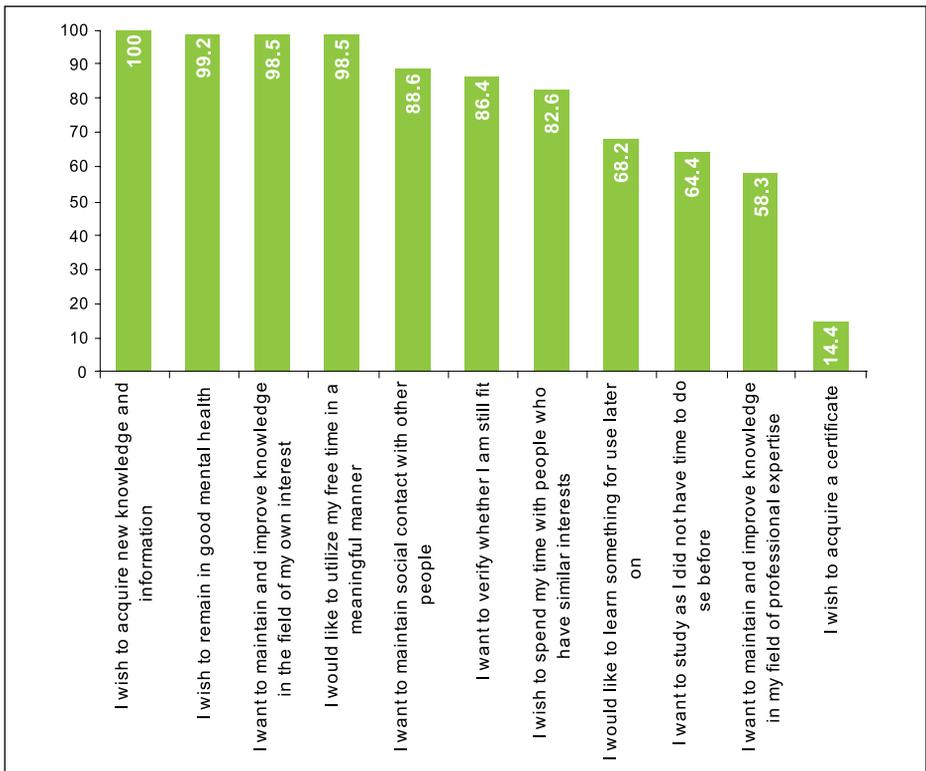
motive	mean	median	mode
I wish to acquire new knowledge and information	1.14	1	1
I want to maintain and improve knowledge in my field of professional expertise	2.69	2	2
I want to maintain and improve knowledge in the field of my own interest	1.30	1	1
I would like to utilize my free time in a meaningful manner	1.29	1	1
I want to verify whether I am still fit	1.74	1	1
I wish to remain in good mental health	1.23	1	1
I want to study as I did not have time to do se before	2.54	2	1
I would like to learn something for use later on	2.24	2	2
I wish to acquire a certificate	4.08	5	5

n = 132

The following table and graph show the combined cumulative frequencies of “strongly agree” and “agree” for individual motives. Motives have been arranged according to intensity.

**Table and graph No. 3:** *Cumulative frequencies of “strongly agree” and “agree” of individual motives for studies in U3A*

motive	cumulative %
I wish to acquire new knowledge and information	100
I wish to remain in good mental health	99.2
I want to maintain and improve knowledge in the field of my own interest	98.5
I would like to utilize my free time in a meaningful manner	98.5
I want to maintain social contact with other people	88.6
I want to verify whether I am still fit	86.4
I wish to spend my time with people who have similar interests	82.6
I would like to learn something for use later on	68.2
I want to study as I did not have time to do se before	64.4
I want to maintain and improve knowledge in my field of professional expertise	58.3
I wish to acquire a certificate	14.4



The results show that the intensity of individual positive motives for studies in U3A courses is considerable. The cumulative frequency of answers relevant to individual motives directly associated with the experience and subjective aspects of senior citizens' quality of life always rated over 60 % and while the professional expertise-related motive was slightly weaker, the cumulative frequency relating the certificate acquisition motive remained far behind.

A comparison between the findings established in our research and in similar studies allows us to conclude that – at least for some of the elderly population – U3A courses comprise a means of maintaining the quality of life of senior citizens in an agreeable and dignified manner. A sense of participation in social life and various events, acquiring new contacts and the option of taking part in voluntary tasks also play an important part.

## **PŘÍNOS UNIVERZIT TŘETÍHO VĚKU KE KVALITĚ ŽIVOTA SENIORŮ**

**Abstrakt:** Vzdělávání v kurzech U3V je určeno osobám v postproduktivním věku. Myšlenka byla poprvé realizována po roce 1970 ve Francii. Masarykova univerzita organizuje kurzy od roku 1990. Podmínkou zařazení do kurzu je dosažení důchodového věku a alespoň středoškolské vzdělání s maturitou. Analýzy motivů ke studiu a zájem o studium, který se neustále zvyšuje, dokládají, že kurzy přispívají ke kvalitě života seniorů. V příspěvku budou interpretovány a diskutovány motivy a důvody účasti v kurzech, zjištěných v našem výzkumu. Porovnáním našich zjištění s údaji z literatury lze dospět k závěru, že kurzy U3V pro část populace seniorů představují jednu z možností, která významnou měrou napomáhá k udržení kvality života pro účastníky vzdělávání U3V seniorů přívětivým a důstojným způsobem. Důležitým aspektem je pro seniory i pocit účasti na společenském dění, navazování kontaktů, možnosti voluntaristického uplatnění.

**Klíčová slova:** kvalita života, Univerzita třetího věku, motivace seniorů ke vzdělávání