

Renewing universities of the third age: challenges and visions for the future

Las universidades para mayores renovadas: desafíos y propuestas para el futuro

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Abstract

The University of the Third Age [UTA] has developed into a global success story. Whether holding a 'top-down' administrative arrangement or embodying a culture of self-help, there can be no doubt as to the triumph of UTAs in meeting the educational, social, and psychological needs of older persons. However, on the basis of fieldwork conducted at the UTA in Malta a cautionary note must be warranted. UTAs may also function as yet another example of glorified occupational therapy that is both conservative and oppressive. At the same time, UTA models seem to be running the risk of becoming obsolete as societies embark on a 'late-modern' model of the life course in which the sequential division between learning, work and retirement is becoming increasingly blurred. This article calls for the UTA movement to go through a cultural revolution to remain relevant to contemporary ageing lifestyles. Six key directions are forwarded: embracing a transformational rationale, ensuring that access overcomes class, gender and ethnic biases, guaranteeing that teaching and learning strategies are skilfully suited to older persons, making greater use of eLearning techniques, extending its activities to frail and physically dependent older people especially those in residential/nursing homes, and organising activities that promote intergenerational learning.

Key words: University of the third age, older persons, education

Resumen

Las universidades para mayores se han convertido en una iniciativa de gran éxito mundial. Ya sea por su organización administrativa «de arriba abajo» o por encarnar una cultura de autoayuda, de lo que no cabe duda es que han conseguido cubrir las necesidades educativas, sociales y psicológicas de las personas mayores. No obstante, a raíz del trabajo de campo llevado a cabo por la Universidad de la Tercera Edad en Malta, hay que poner una nota de cautela. Estas universidades podrían quedarse como un ejemplo más de terapia ocupacional glorificada con un carácter tanto conservador como opresor. Al mismo tiempo, los modelos de las universidades para mayores parecen correr el riesgo de quedarse obsoletos a medida que las sociedades adoptan un modelo «tardomoderno» del curso de vida en el que se va desdibujando la división secuencial entre aprendizaje, trabajo y ju-

bilación. Este artículo reclama que el movimiento de universidades para mayores experimente una revolución cultural que tenga sentido para los estilos de vida contemporáneos de las personas mayores. Así, se proponen seis indicaciones: adoptar una lógica transformacional; garantizar un acceso sin prejuicios de clase, género o raza; garantizar que las estrategias de docencia y aprendizaje sean técnicamente apropiadas para las personas mayores; incrementar el uso de las técnicas de aprendizaje a distancia; extender sus actividades a personas mayores con salud delicada o físicamente dependientes y en particular a aquellas que están en residencias o clínicas; y, por último, organizar actividades que promuevan el aprendizaje intergeneracional.

Palabras clave: Universidad para mayores, personas mayores, educación

INTRODUCTION

The education of older persons is the fastest growing branch of adult education in post-industrial countries and the most crucial issue facing current educational planning. Recent years have witnessed a range of policy statements at international and national levels aimed at encouraging and highlighting the increasing numbers and percentages of older persons taking part in educational programmes. In particular, the European Union has assigned growing importance to lifelong learning and to adult learning in particular. The conclusions of the European Council held in Lisbon in 2000 confirm that the move towards lifelong learning must accompany a successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society of all citizens irrespective of age (Commission of the European Community, 2000, 2006). This is not surprising considering the unprecedented series of global demographic transformations during the second half of the 20th century. In the mid-1990s, one million people a month crossed the threshold of 60 years of age across the globe, a 20 per cent increase from the 800,000 figure reported in 1991, so that at the turn of the new millennium the global number of 60+ persons reached 606 million (United Nations, 2003). However, population ageing is not just a numerical phenomenon. Until the first half of the last century adults spent virtually all their lives working and caring for their family, following which they entered into a period of dependency and decrepitude until death. From the 1950s, a fundamental change began to emerge. For the first time in history, a combination of compulsory retirement, pensions, and increased longevity resulted in the greater majority of older people in industrialised countries to experience many healthy, active, and potentially self-fulfilling years. Although, the exact definition of the «third age», as this new phase

in the life course has been termed, continues to be subject to debate, it is essentially a period in life between a second age of maturity and a fourth age of frailty during which there is no longer employment and child-raising to commandeer time so that individuals can live their lives as they please (Laslett, 1996).

One of the most successful providers of older adult education is the University of the Third Age (UTA). UTAs can be loosely defined as socio-cultural centres where older persons acquire new knowledge of significant issues, or validate the knowledge which they already possess, in an agreeable milieu and in accordance with easy and acceptable methods. The UTA movement has developed into a global success story, spreading to all continents, and amounting to several thousand units with varying structures and programmes. UTAs are linked through the International Association of the Universities of the Third Age (AUITA) which has accreditation to the United Nations and other influential organisations. This paper is a continuation of my efforts to embed the field of older adult education in a critical perspective (Formosa, 2000, 2002, 2005, 2007). A «critical» lens goes beyond everyday appearances and the unreflective acceptance of established positions, «to analyse how and why gender, race, class and other inequalities are so often ignored» (Estes et al., 2004: 3). This article reports on fieldwork conducted at the UTA in Malta with the ultimate aim to focus on «what *could* or *ought* to be» rather than «what *is*». Two key arguments ground the first part of the discussion. First, that UTAs may fall in the trap of operating as yet another euphemism for glorified occupational therapy that is both conservative and oppressive. And secondly, that UTAs are generally experiencing a structural lag as traditional operating principles tend to become less relevant now that societies are experiencing the de-institutionalisation of the life course. The third and final part of this article outlines six «ideal» directions for the UTA movement to remain relevant and in tune to contemporary ageing lifestyles.

THE ORIGINS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

The first UTA resulted partly from the French 1968 Law on the Direction of Higher Education which gave universities the obligation to provide for the organisation of lifelong education. At that time, France did not have anything corresponding to the British «night school» tradition but the Université de Troisième Age was to alter such a situation radically. The UTA phenomenon was born primarily from the ideas of Pierre Vellas who recognised the combined vitality and longevity of many older persons in

France, and believed that universities should promote a combination of instruction for seniors and gerontological research that improves the life of older persons. Vellas held that the goal of the UTA was to investigate without any preconceived notions, how the University could improve the quality of life of older persons who, as demographic statistics at that time suggested, were becoming more and more numerous and whose socio-economic conditions were often in a deplorable condition. In 1972, Vellas proposed the UTA idea to the Administrative Council of the Teaching and Research Unit in Toulouse, formed by representatives of the professors, students, administrative personnel, as well as representatives from the WHO, ILO, and UNESCO (Philibert, 1984). This proposal was unanimously adopted and without any specific budgetary means, but much preparatory work, four major objectives were formulated for this new educational enterprise. These included raising the level of physical, mental, social health and the quality of life of older people, realising a permanent educational programme for older people in close relational with other age groups, that is the active and the young, co-ordinate gerontological research programmes, and last but not least, realising initial and permanent education programmes in gerontology (Vellas, 1997).

The UTA in Toulouse was eventually opened to anyone over retirement age who was willing to fill in a simple enrolment form and pay a nominal fee. The learning activities were scheduled for daylight hours, five days a week, for eight or nine months of the year. After the programme was marketed on a limited basis, 100 older persons attended the opening session in the summer of 1973. Teachers were highly enthusiastic about the motivation and sheer human warmth displayed by older students, and marvelled at the way they learnt with new techniques such as audio-visual language laboratories. One must say here that initially there was nothing exceptional about this programme, apart from the fact that a section of a large provincial university had taken an interest in ageing, and decided to enlist the resources of the university in programmes for senior citizens which would, at the same time, provide some returns in pursuing research in order to define the needs of older persons. However, successes were so swift that other groups were created very quickly in other parts of France. The Toulouse UTA model was eventually adopted by over 60 French campuses and by 1979 there were over 2,000 enrolled students (Radcliffe, 1984). Although there were some variations, almost all French UTAs being developed in the early and late seventies had university affiliation, relied on using university facilities, including the services of faculty members, and generally offered programmes of study tailored toward older persons, such

as the medical and social problems of ageing. Moreover lectures were combined with debates, field trips, and recreational and physical opportunities.

In 1979, adult educators from France and Britain met at Keele University. There resulted an issuing of an educational manifesto which was to be the heart of the British UTA movement, and which stated that the concept of elderly as both teachers and learners needs to replace the image of elders as intrinsically wise or the more recent image of elders as necessarily dependent or burdensome (Midwinter, 1984). The first UTA in England was established in Cambridge and was launched in July 1981. In contrast to the French experience, the Cambridge UTA rejected the idea of pre-packaged courses for more or less passive digestion, and demanded a kind of intellectual democracy in which there would be no distinction between the teachers and taught. British UTA co-ordinators appealed that all members would be expected to participate, and those who were reluctant to teach would contribute in some other way such as administration or counselling (Glendenning, 1985). UTAS in Britain did not develop into campus-based organisations, although the UTAS in Lancaster and London University were notable exceptions, and more akin to Illich's (1973) visions in *Deschooling Society*. British UTAS sought a kind of intellectual democracy in which there would be no distinction between the teachers and those being taught, and consequently, a self-help rather than a government-supported model was adopted (Midwinter, 2004). Self-help groups are voluntary, small group structures for mutual aid and the accomplishment for a specific purpose. They are usually formed by peers who have come together for mutual assistance in satisfying a common need, overcoming a common handicap or life-disrupting problem, and bringing about desired social and/or personal change. More specifically, the British UTAS' objectives consisted in (i) educating the British society, (ii) assailing the dogma of intellectual decline with age and make those in their later years aware of their intellectual, cultural and aesthetic potentialities, (iii) providing retirees with the resources of development and intensification of their intellectual and cultural lives, (iv) organising this institution where learning is pursued, skilled acquired, research opening pursued, and intellectual interests developed as ends in themselves, (v) investigating the process of ageing in British society, (vi) encouraging the establishment of similar institutions in every part of the country, and finally, (vii) helping to mobilise efforts to offer elderly persons in Britain other opportunities of educational stimulation on as wide a basis as possible (Laslett, 1984).

UNIVERSITIES OF THE THIRD AGE: CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT

The UTA movement has gone a long way since its inception in the early 1970s and is currently present in all the five continents. It is surely not the scope of this article to present an international perspective of the UTA phenomenon and it suffices to state that at the turn of the millennium, China alone contained some 19,300 centres with about 1.81 million members (Thompson, 2002). In early 2009 Australia and New Zealand included 211 (64,535 members) and 60 (10,154 members) UTAS respectively (U3A Online, 2009), and the United Kingdom listed as much as 731 UTAS with a total of 228,873 members in the same period (The Third Age Trust, 2009). Since the late 1990s, a number of educational institutions began to investigate the suitability of cyberspace for older adult education. UTAS were not an exception, and much road has been travelled in Australia under the auspices of U3A Online which can surely be viewed as a remarkable success story. U3A Online provides good quality educational programmes to older Australians who were previously isolated and devoid of social networking activity, with an overwhelming number of participants giving the thumbs-up to this distance learning project and calling for further expansion (Swindell, 2000, 2002).

AUITA records five diverse models of UTAS in contemporary times depending on institutions' form of linkage to a traditionally defined or host-university, the curriculum offered, and kind of participation offered to or required by the members (Levesque, 2006). In addition to the French and British models discussed in the previous section, there is the French-speaking North American model, the South American model, and the Chinese model. The latter offers very diverse types of education, from basic instruction to the most advanced artistic training. Intense activity in traditional arts and crafts is an obvious characteristic. Seen from the outside one would take the view that the UTAS in China have as the following main concerns: the maintenance and development of citizenship, cultural consolidation and philosophical reflection, and maintenance and development of bodily harmony. There are normally six types of courses: health care, physical exercises, humanities, skills, arts and politics. Courses may be short-term, or run from one to three years. Teaching is very relaxed and flexible, to suit the students' needs. New methods are constantly being tried, including providing information and setting up discussions on current events, supplying magazines and newspapers, organising study tours and visits, using modern facilities and running exhibitions and competitions.

The French-speaking North American model holds a close link with a university, with classes and lectures given by University lecturers, either current or retired, and by outside speakers. The activities are of many different kinds: classes, seminars, group discussions, guided tours, lecture visits, and group activities. Student participation also occurs in the planning of syllabuses, models of activity, and in the choice of lecturers. The day-to-day management of these activities is in the hands of the students' Association in partnership with the University. In this model there is recognition of both the members themselves and of their knowledge and power in the students' associations. This is a model which can reasonably be said to lie at the crossroads between the French and British UTAS. Finally, the South American model is very close to the French UTA model but has two very distinguishing features. First, an institutional link to a host University where the link is regarded as self-evident, as much from the host University's point of view as from that of the UTA. And secondly, a concern for the population as a whole as in South and Central America care for the education of the whole of the older population, including the most deprived, is at its most marked and results in some most impressive achievements.

Financial matters of UTAS are highly varied (Desautels, 2006). In the Czech Republic, for instance, the Ministry of Education provides half a million euros for UTAS. Other UTAS are associated with «official» universities and simply benefit from the use of premises and the support offered by the presence of a stable professorial staff. In Switzerland, on the other hand, everything is in the hands of volunteers who organise the activities which are funded by members' subscriptions and charges for the activities although UTAS sometimes receive grants from local authorities. In Portugal, UTAS receive no funding from governmental bodies or from the universities, a case which is also the case for Italian UTAS which lean heavily on retired teachers to sustain their efforts. An AUITA (2006) international survey found that almost half the members are in the 60-69 age cohort (40 per cent) followed by peers in the 70-79 age cohort (23 per cent), and that half the members are either married or having significant partners (49 per cent). A large segment of members joined the UTAS to learn new knowledge (41 per cent) although the furthering of social contacts (38 per cent) proved to be yet another significant motivation. On joining UTAS, members reported increasing friendships (15 per cent), personal satisfaction (9 per cent), self-awareness (4 per cent), social involvement (5 per cent), and learning new knowledge (17 per cent). Reasons for not renewing one's membership in the UTAS included cost (10 per cent), health (24 per cent), transport issues

(13 per cent), family care (19 per cent), and lack of interest (14 per cent). Members also called for more courses in information and computer technology, astronomy, languages, memory work and natural sciences, as well as an increase in intercultural and intergenerational activities. Such data reflects past surveys (Swindell, 1990a, 1990b) as well as more recent ones. For instance, Yenerall (2003) found that the average age of Finnish members is 68, as much as 85 per cent are female, and that the majority of members were married (52 per cent) and having completed secondary education (70 per cent). Reasons for joining the UTA consisted «to learn more and gain a general education», «take or complete practical courses», and «better understand problems faced».

The UTA experience is more than an educational one. When members are asked what they gain from involvement in UTA activities, the first thing that comes to their mind is not usually related to learning but the associated social outcomes, such as making new friends who share their interests and finding a support group which helps them through difficult periods in their personal life (Huang, 2005, 2006, Hori and Cusack, 2006). UTAS are typified by a sense of vitality and dynamism that go beyond what is usually the case in a normal adult education centre. UTAS fulfil various positive social and individual functions such as aiding lonely older persons to resocialise themselves in society by enabling them to form new groups and increase living interests, as well as providing opportunities, stimulation, patterns, and content for the use and structure of the older persons' free-time which would otherwise be characterised by inactivity. UTAS also develop in its members a lofty and progressive delight of life, increase the social integration and harmony of older persons in society, inject a sense of creativity in older persons, and make older persons more visible in society. They improve members' abilities of understanding the objective world by aiding them to grasp better world development and social progress, and help them to ameliorate their abilities of self-health by enabling them to master medical care knowledge and prevention of disease. UTAS have also been found to address various intellectual, emotional, physical, leisure, and spiritual needs of older persons, as well as providing older persons with the opportunity to organise and co-ordinate social/cultural activities and thus making their life more fruitful and energetic.

METHOD

Data for this research publication was as a result of my involvement with the Maltese UTA as a faculty member of the European Centre of Gerontology (University of Malta) part of which the Maltese University of the Third Age forms part. Data was collected through the techniques of «data combination», that is, the utilisation of more than one data collection method. Data combination reveals a wider view of the complexity of human behaviour, adds rigor, breadth, and depth to the study, as well as compensating for the limitations in one method by the strengths of another (Neuman, 2002). Methods included «participant» and «non-participant» observation, and semi-structured interviews. The observational method is the fundamental technique in field research, utilised in this study to observe the interpersonal interactions taking place at the UTA as well as to understand the members as individuals. Observational research has various strengths over other methods. These include its ability to shift focus as interesting new data become available, take account of sequences of events, and studying phenomena as they occur in their natural settings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both UTA organisers and learners. In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer asks specific open-ended questions but is free to probe beyond them if necessary with the interview developing as a joint product of what the interviewees and interviewers talk with each other. Hence, they contain the advantages of «flexibility», «control of the interview situation», and the «collection of supplementary information». Attention was geared towards fieldwork's major ethical dilemmas, namely, consent and codes, deception, privacy, identification, confidentiality, and not spoiling the field. In this respect, I strove to research subjects with dignity, making sure not to impose upon them any harm, respecting their privacy by collecting the data in an anonymous form and keeping it confidential. I also made sure to notify them that they were being researched, about my role at the institution, the nature of the research, and research methods being used. Moreover, during my fieldwork, but especially during its final stages, I made sure not to leave any unfinished business or annoy the members in any way.

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE IN MALTA

Malta is a relative latecomer in establishing its UTA. The UTA in Valletta, or as we call it in our native tongue, L'Universita' Tat-Tielet Eta' [U3E], was

launched in January 1993 and thus could draw on some 20 years of European experience. The U3E was founded as part of then Institute of Gerontology (now European Centre of Gerontology) within the University of Malta and is, therefore, more in accordance with the French UTA model than the British. The U3E is governed by a mission statement, written and developed by university academics, declaring specifically that the U3E aims to provide older persons with educational opportunities as an end in themselves. The first U3E programme, was not launched as a pilot project but as a full-scale activity, resulting from the aspirations of academics and government officials working in the field of ageing. The U3E in Malta is governed by a «mission statement» written and developed by university academics:

...real life, free of constraints, of worries and of imposed responsibilities, starts with retirement. Yet, as long as one lives, one feels a natural yearning to know more, to explore and to understand. The University of the Third Age is making this possible for everyone. Thinking keeps us young... The U3E will encourage creativity and will propose several projects for this purpose... The U3E will also encourage special interest groups for pursuing hobbies or other interests. (U3E Prospectus, undated, *circa* 1992)

The U3E is governed by two main committees. Whilst the academic matters are in the hands of a committee chosen by the University of Malta, the U3E's social undertakings are managed by a democratically elected «Association» from the U3E members. The U3E aims to offer courses which are not intended to lead their participants to obtain any material or credential gains. The U3E approaches education as consisting of the pursuit of non-utilitarian knowledge through which one's mind and personality can be enhanced. The U3E offers a wide variety of courses, based on the assumed needs and interests of older persons. These range from heavy courses such as philosophy to day-to-day courses such as gardening that aim precisely to empower older persons and improve the quality of their lives and potential. Members have no direct control over the institution's programme content, and although members are free to submit feedback and suggest new courses, the choice of courses rests solely in the hands of university academics. The U3E's prospectus states that the curricular programme «has been designed to cover aspects of special interest to the elderly social rights and responsibilities, pensions, support services, health care, including physical exercise, dieting, food and the prevention of illness and disability. Other programmes will be purely cultural». The tutors are non- U3E members and are either full-time or part-time university lecturers, and are paid according to university rates.

THE POLITICS OF OLDER ADULT EDUCATION

A critical take on the fieldwork data found that the Maltese UTA tends to function as yet another example of glorified occupational therapy that is both conservative and oppressive. This was especially evident due to the presence of two key intersecting and interlocking lines of inequality: social class and gender.

Social class

The correlation of class and participation in compulsory and continuing education is one of the strongest, as well as most enduring, scientific axioms of contemporary societies (Ball, 2005). The U3E was not an exception. Although it was open to everybody and offered no hindrances or obstacles to older persons wanting to join, in that the only requirements were a birth certificate indicating that one is over 60 years old and willingness to pay a nominal fee, the membership body was exceedingly middle-class in character. To middle-class older persons it means going back to an arena in which they feel confident and self-assured of its outcome and development. Members displayed strong forms of middle-class dress codes, linguistic variations, etiquette and gestures. They also flaunted the prestigious positions and responsibilities occupied before retirement, and tended to address each other on a title-surname basis. Members spoke with idealistic overtones as they believed that learning should form the crown of life, were cynical of the routine and pragmatic pattern of everyday practices, used various foreign words to express their thoughts and ideas, and employed the term «we» to describe themselves by which they meant the subgroup of older persons who possessed optimum levels of education and cultured taste. Most female members had retired from rewarding careers in the teaching profession, and made their utmost so that their character displayed a «professional femininity». Rather than propelling an interest to buy the latest juice-blender which, as a local advert promises, performs «a million-and-one functions at even a cheaper price», female members were focused on post-materialist issues such as, for example, how they can have more sunlight in their living-room and whether the latest fuss about Jamie Oliver was reasonable. The fact that values centred around «idealism» rather than «materialism» demonstrated that U3E members embraced a culture of reflexivity. This was evident by members' pursuit of expressive lifestyles, eagerness to instruct themselves

in the bourgeois ethos of freedom, close affinity with traditional intellectuals, and dominant preference for expressive learning over instructional education.

The U3E also functioned as a middle-class political organisation as members performed, both consciously and unconsciously, a number of social closure tactics which made the learning experience unappealing to older persons with low levels of income and education. Most centrally, the choice of subjects taught at the U3E, such as *History and Appreciation of Art* and *The Many Faces of Pirandello* which sometimes were even delivered in the English language, provided an alien environment to older persons from working-class milieus. The emphasis of the term «university» in the title is another case in point as many working-class persons are apprehensive to join an organisation with such a heavy baggage. Members had no qualms about claiming that the U3A programme suits best persons who have «an adequate level of education» and that older persons who are interested in learning crafts or hobbies, or possess a low level of education, being more suited to attending senior centres. The U3E holds a useful function for middle-class retirees in their effort to maintain and improve their position in the class structure. On retirement, the class condition of middle-class retirees becomes cut off from their class position which generates a «status inconsistency». Retirement thus forces middle-class persons to an arena of role ambiguity, enforcing a dependence on the state welfare system, and declining their «social worth» as their position in the «social space» changes from that of «achievement» to one of «ascription». Consequently, as previous identities and statuses associated with one's occupational position are erased and become meaningless, middle-class older persons attempt to enrol in new arenas for moral and practical support as well as to reassert their previous and intended position in the social space. Membership in the U3E provides them with the possibility of acquiring the label of «cultured» or «cultivated» with respect to the rest of the older adult population. In the way that books and paintings are used to impress neighbours, friends and other social viewers, U3E membership becomes employed as a strategy to obtain and compete for social honour.

In sum, as far as class politics are concerned, the U3E serves as a reproductive and domesticating educational agent since it does not elaborate on all the various forms of learning but only those that go hand-in-hand with a functional-liberal paradigm. In doing so, it functions as a «cultural arbitrary» as well as a perpetuator of «symbolic violence» by imposing «middle-class» meanings as legitimate. Indeed, the U3E has not escaped the «pervasiveness of schooling» as its organisation operated

through a top-down model of instruction which cultivates respect for authority, experts, and universal knowledge. Rather than taking the form of a corporation of persons devoted to a particular activity, as the medieval interpretation of the term «university» presupposes, the U3E incorporated traits highly similar to those found in traditional education.

Gender

Many an educational vision, including that of lifelong education, has been criticised for its gender bias (Jackson and Burke, 2007). The application of a «feminist» lens to the U3E finds that its programme perceived older learners as a homogenous population, a stand that is fundamentally «malestream» considering the great divide in the type and volume of capital held by older men and women. Older women in Malta, similar to their international peers, are less likely than men to have received workplace learning, received an apprenticeship, hold educational qualifications, and hold an occupational pension (Troisi and Formosa, 2006). Older women tend to be poor, live longer, experience widowhood, and reside in single households. Cultural constructs put a large proportion of older women in the army of informal carers who either support sick and disabled relatives, especially husbands and aunts, or as it is becoming increasingly frequent in current times, as carers of their grandchildren whilst their children and son/daughter-in-law work full time. Ultimately, one can never overemphasise the «double standard of aging» that is, the severe difficulties that older women face as the result of the combination of ageist and sexist prejudices. The U3E revolves around an educational programme that caters for the needs of all older people when older women have unique educational needs. Moreover, ageist-sexist stereotypes project low expectations that older women can successfully take part in educational pursuits, the limitations of older women to take part in education classes when class and transport fees are being raised, and their difficulty in finding time for educational programmes when caring is so time-consuming. This invariably demonstrates the need for a special curriculum for older women, with alternative timings during the day which give them with the opportunity to plan the lectures, which addresses poverty as a major concern and also include specific vocational training for either paid or voluntary work. Looking at ways of facilitating learning amongst older women necessities a reformation of the conventional ways in which older adult education is currently employed. For the U3E to be of significance to

older women's lives it must be sensitive to the specific learning needs of older women, ranging from financial literacy to informal care, as well as knowledgeable of the unique and specific barriers they experience.

U3E lecturers, the majority of whom were men, tend to think and act within a «malestream» discourse, and hence, failing to connect with the special features of women's life histories or to the fact that older women learn differently when compared to men. Older women have a preference for self-directed education (such as reading, library membership, and travel) and topics which deal with personal or self-fulfilment matters. Moreover, they are more likely to express a preference for future learning activities that are expressive (delayed gratification) rather than instrumental (immediate gratification) in nature, and are more troubled by situational (arising from one's situation in life) and dispositional (self-perceptions) barriers to learning than institutional ones (institutional practices and procedures). Indeed, older women have an extensive ability to make use of «inner resources» to overcome obstacles to learning, so that it appears that they have a greater margin of power than men in overcoming obstacles at least until permanent health decline sets in. Keeping in mind such issues, it ensues that it is important for older adult education to cater exclusively for the unique learning patterns of older women by making use of small group discussion to assisting them in discovering personal talents, making educational resources available so that older women can instruct themselves, as well as assisting teachers and trainers to understand their role in promoting individualised and self-directed learning. One strategy that has received favourable reviews with older women is reminiscence learning (Housden, 2007). Reminiscence can help identify coping strategies from past experiences, and thus, preserving one's sense of mastery which, in turn, is a major source of satisfaction and needed in every stage of development. For instance, reminiscence can aid in identifying personal coping skills regarding the handling of daily finances. Since money is often considered a taboo topic and not readily discussed, the use of reminiscence can enable someone to gain understanding and appreciation of their past experiences and behaviour concerning the use of their money.

In retrospect, fieldwork located a «masculinist» discourse within the U3E where women are generally silenced and made passive through their invisibility. A feminist praxis was completely missing from the U3E's rationale. There is highly unfortunate considering that one key catalyst leading towards the increasing popularity of older adult education consisted in the «feminisation of later life» since women are more receptive to joining educational classes. The U3E provided a too firm stand on

providing learning *to* women instead of striving to provide learning *for* women so that it was characterised by a focus on the under-representation of women rather than becoming a vehicle of transformation. In other words, the U3E was too much bent on providing «learning» rather than being directly involved in action research projects which attempt to change women's lives.

STRUCTURAL LAG

The UTA was founded and flourished in the 1970s, during times whose socio-economic and political fabric was essentially «modernist» in character compared to contemporary times. In the 1970s, there was no possibility of mistaking or confusing who the older people were: mainly poor, probably with similar outlooks (and indeed appearance), with limited aspirations for future lifestyles, experiencing poor housing and inadequate medical care, and simply treated as a reserve army of labour to be expelled from the labour market in a period of crises (Phillipson, 1982). The life course was markedly divided in three clear and distinct stages: childhood as a time for education, adulthood as a time to raise a family and work, and old age as a brief period characterised by withdrawal from work until frail health and eventually death. This put individuals in a foreseeable life course of continuous, consecutive sequences of functions and statuses, which would culminate in a cessation of work following a normal period of full-time employment (Guillemard, 2000). Retirement during this decade was experienced as a major life event that caused personal and emotional upheaval so that many countries chose to institutionalise retirement through the development of old age pensions. The motivation herein was to aid those older persons who could neither continue in their existing job nor find alternative work as well as widowed women without any economic support. Hence, the identity of older people developed and existed within the context of the welfare state. Pensions, a focus on residential and institutional care, and the role of the voluntary sector in aiding older persons were instrumental in increasing amongst older persons a high degree of dependence as well as an image of a social group who needs all the support it could get.

As the social fabric became more fluid in character, ageing and later life have become less connected with the institution of «retirement» as such but on the other hand increasingly contingent on the «third age» phenomenon. Ageing became more complex, differentiated and ill-defined, experienced

from a variety of perspectives and expressed in a variety of ways. In late modern societies, identities take on «reflexive organized endeavour» that operate on the basis of choice and flexibility, and hence, replacing the rigidity of the traditional life cycle with its predetermined rites of passage. The life course ceased to be a fixed set of stages occupied by people of specific age-brands, with ageing becoming increasingly marked by a blurring of what appeared previously to be the typical behaviour associated with this stage. Nowadays, later life demands the deliberation and planning of a post-work identity. The latter involves not only the creation of a narrative of the self, but also a continuing responsibility in which the question «how shall I live?» has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave measured against the flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000). Third age identities are elaborated through increasing material consumption, a sense of «packing life in» to a period of adulthood of uncertain length and a wary position in relation to providing for «old age»:

...third-agers, whilst acknowledging old age, are likely to prefer to live at a considerable physical and psychological distance from it...while third-age practices may be most fully enacted by a relatively small section of the population of older people, culturally this group represents the aspirations of many whether or not they are able to realize such a lifestyle. (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000: 45, 23)

Education in later life does not occur in a social vacuum but is intimately connected to wider social contours. Hence, for education to be authentic it must run in parallel to the structural and biographical experiences of learners. In this respect, fieldwork uncovered four factors that point towards a structural lag, that is, the tendency of the structure of roles, norms and social institutions of the U3E , to change more slowly and thus lag behind people's lives. First, the Maltese U3E portrays older adults as a homogenous group, alike in gender, age, able-bodiedness, socio-economic status, and ethnicity. Indeed, no effort is made to address the diversity of the ageing population. Discussion during lectures always centred on what «the elderly» or «elders», «retired», «older adults», and «seniors» want. Hence, it lacked sensitivity towards the specific interests of the various social groupings that make the older population so heterogeneous in character. In addition to older women, whose position was discussed in the precedent section, other overlooked sectors included older people who never went to school and frail people usually aged 75+ who tend to suffer from physical and cognitive disabilities. As regards the former, the U3E was oblivious to the fact that almost half of the Maltese population was illiterate.

Presuming that older persons have good levels of educational attainment and qualifications, the U3E restricted its courses to highbrow topics without providing more pragmatic courses ranging from literacy to financial management. As regards fourth agers, the U3E assumes that only mobile and healthy elders are interested in educational classes. Indeed, its programme neglects how education opportunities can serve towards the personal development of frail and dependent older people since learning reduces dependency and the concomitant costs of health care.

Second, by restricting its membership and activities to persons who are aged 60 or above the U3E's programme provides an age-segregated form of learning. Although it is true that third-age segregated learning provides a greater degree of commonality and likelihood of peer support, as well as convenient daytime scheduling, length and frequency of course, semesters, affordable costs, and simpler registration procedures, it remains that age-isolated programmes incorporate other drawbacks. By disengaging its older learners from younger peers, the U3E was at fault for not responding well to the needs of older adults as well as for lacking to provide differentiated and specialised course programmes. In this way, the U3E ran the risk of becoming an inferior adult education centre due to embodying a low level of the quality of educational experience and courses offered. Indeed, intergenerational education leads to greater tolerance, increased comfort and intimacy, partial dissolving of rigid stereotypes, and less fear of the other groups, as well as engendering positive attitudes between persons coming from different age generations (Manheimer et al., 1995). One finds various studies on the possible educational relationship between grandparents and grandchildren (Bernal and Anuncibay, 2008), a model which could be easily adopted by the U3E. Research supports the traditional view that grandparents provide grandchildren with an educational input that is different to that which the parents can provide. This is because apart from being a source of unconditional love and a place where grandchildren can find refuge when seeking consolation, grandparents are crucial providers of knowledge and values.

Third, the U3E is deprived of any distance learning through online learning strategies on the basis that one educational planner believes that «it is not a question of receiving knowledge, one's participation is important». The idea is that when you join a UTA, «you are meeting people, sharing ideas, while distance learning is a one-to-one affair which is not the aim of the U3E, at least here in Malta [because] using the principles of distance learning would kill the aims of the U3E for which it was set up» (quoted in Formosa, 2000: 324). Although it is true that in the past one

consistent theme was the definition of computer technology in limited, linear, and rigid terms that were far removed from the creative, productive, and empowering uses often celebrated by educationists, this picture cannot be further from the truth in current times. In the past few years, the Internet has developed as a medium that can, very inexpensively, increase the range of opportunities for older people to continue to challenge their intellects. Moreover, the medium is capable of providing a level of interactivity that many find socially stimulating. Increasing levels of computer literacy and improving cyberspace programmes pushed online education to improve life satisfaction, with internet users being more positive than non-users concerning psychological well-being and personal characteristics. In Australia, for instance, the U3A Online programme demonstrated that adult education programmes delivered through cyberspace make a considerable difference to the lives of isolated people in particular and, probably, to others as well (Swindell, 2000).

Finally, older persons in late modern society do not spend their days sitting down waiting for time to pass. Rather, they are embracing the philosophies of «active» and «productive» ageing, as they engage in consumer lifestyles as well as seeking the opportunity to re-enter the labour market. In this regard, older persons are interested in consumer education and re-skilling training which, to-date, are not being offered by the U3E. Third agers are yearning for programmes in consumer education which provide them with those skills, concepts and understanding that are required for everyday living to achieve maximum satisfaction and utilization of his resources. During fieldwork many members expressed disappointment at the lack of courses on financial literacy at the U3E, and were highly equivocal about their need to access more and better information about financial procedures and industries, and acquire increased confidence and trust to engage with the providers of services and products. At the same time, many older adults want to continue working but also want a change of direction. Reasons may include the development of new interests, the awareness of previously underutilised potential, changes in personal values, and a realisation that time is running out if they are to achieve their personal ambitions and objectives. Simultaneously, many older adults want to retire from their current place of work but not to stop working indefinitely. They want to upskill themselves to work in jobs they want, and to remain attractive to employers, or to move into other lines of work. They are attempting to find other ways besides their labour that they can earn income. In this regard, the U3E is doing nothing to ensure that older adults are able to maximise their contributions to work and the

national economy, sitting rigidly on the fence whilst older persons expect good-quality guidance.

RENEWING UNIVERSITIES OF THE THIRD AGE

Although the inferences in the two previous sections were premised on fieldwork carried out the Maltese U3E, they can be «moderately» generalized to other UTAS. As early as 1979 sociologists declared that the movement «pandered to the cultural pretensions of an aged bourgeoisie who had already learned to play the system» (Morris, 1984: 136; see also Ward and Taylor, 1986). More recently, it was underlined that

There continues to be a compounding class divide affecting chances to return to learn. Older people who have experienced post-school education and training, and those who already have advanced qualifications and skills are already convinced of the joy of learning and return for more... Working class older people are most likely to feel alienated by their previous experience of the educational system, and to be least confident about their ability or opportunity to return to learning. (Carlton and Soulsby, 1999: 72)

Moreover, other researchers have recorded the gender biases in UTAS (Williamson, 2000), as well as the need for embrace and work on emergent challenges (Groombridge, 1994). The key deduction here is that UTAS tend to be «modernist» in character, harking back and making sense to a world in which the rigid separation between childhood, adulthood and later life was strictly adhered to and also constituted the cornerstone of socio-economic organisation. This article puts forward six propositions whose inclusion will provide a serious attempt to keep UTAS in line with contemporary socio-economic transformations amongst older cohorts.

A transformational rationale. The provision of older adult education should be directed to aid older persons gain power over their lives. Education must not be viewed as a commodity which, via the medium of a lecture, anybody may acquire. Rather, education is to be viewed as a vehicle for retraining or adjusting to technological change, relating to self-fulfilment and the reinforcement of a sense of purpose, and above all, a catalyst for individual and social empowerment. UTAS must provide opportunities for older adults to become conscious of the cultural dimension of messages about ageing, to assess their validity on the basis of individual experience and broader research, and to develop their own perspective. Rather than simply offering high-brow learning, it is the

process of engaging older adults in dialogue to enable them to discover their own meaning, identity, and purpose in the face of cultural messages about aging. In sum, UTAS must embrace a rationale for a transformative approach to education against the backdrop of an analysis of the current political scenario marked by neoliberalism and the effect of this ideology on educational policy and practice.

Social inclusion. It is fundamental that UTAS dismantle those barriers which exclude older persons, other than middle-class white urban females to seek membership, from seeking membership and participating in educational activities. UTAS must work to counter the *psychosocial* barriers such as the stereotypical and ageist belief in the adage «I'm too old to learn», and adopt a sensitivity towards the fact that disability may prevent people's adequate mobility or the need to use public transport may limit access. UTA centers must not contain non user-friendly enrolment procedures (such as high fees, inappropriate venues or unexciting methods of teaching and learning), and communication problems such as brochures printed in too small type and crammed formatting or a failure to display brochures in places which older adults frequent. Moreover, in its effort to attract working-class men, more visibility is warranted to the fact that the term «University» is actually used in the medieval sense of the term «universitas», that is, referring to a corporation of persons devoted to a particular activity, and does not refer to awarding of degrees, diplomas, or any other kind of certification.

Geragogy. UTAS must reject traditional models of education «in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositor» (Freire, 1972: 45). Educators must embrace a liberating practice that helps learners to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions. This involves two major steps. The first is to generate a liberating curriculum. This involves the immersion of educators within older people's thematic universe in order to develop «generative themes», which then are codified into other motifs that older learners can identify with. The second step consists of aiding learners to perform a successful decodification of the former. Only so will inherent social, political and economic oppressions become apparent. This can be achieved through the strategies of dialogue and problem-posing. Whilst «dialogue» demands the problematic conformation of that very knowledge in its unquestionable relationship with the concrete reality in which it is engendered, problem-posing involves a constant unveiling of reality and revolutionary futurity. Through such strategies learners «not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening

awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality» (ibid: 51).

eLearning. UTAS must put more effort to embed in their learning strategies the web 2.0 revolution which now provides extremely user-friendly applications. Contrary to its predecessor, web 2.0 uses interactive tools, ranging from Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, online journals, to virtual picture databases, which offer limitless possibilities for an interactive, empowering, and participatory forms of older adult education. The education of older persons through strategies of Information and Communication Technology [ICT] is advantageous for seniors as well as the institutions. Through the utilisation of ICT strategies, UTAS may reach new learners interested in lifelong learning who may not be able to be physically present in the classroom at a specific date, and hence, who otherwise might not have been able to participate in educational programmes. On the other hand, seniors benefit by discovering new and further fields of education, widening their information sources, take part in communication with other people with common and specific interests, and being to able to participate in learning activities even when they are suffering temporarily or permanently ill health.

Fourth age learning. The development and educational needs of frail older people, especially the physically dependent and those living in residential/nursing homes, must be made central to UTAS. Lifelong learning should really be *lifelong* so that it also caters for those others suffering from confusion or dementia, with, for example, encouragement for educators to make use of specialised strategies. Following Lloyd and Gladish's (quoted in NIACE, 2005) code of practice for older people learning in care settings, UTAS must recognise that different modes of mental activity should be recognised which range from passive to the creative since older people should have varying control over the learning activities in which they participate. Older people, irrespective of their cognitive abilities, should be fully involved in the maintenance of their past skills and interests, and in developing new ones, of their choice. They should be involved in the creation of care packages and support plans. UTAS must therefore work hand-in-hand together with residential units, care homes and sheltered schemes should encourage older people to maintain contact with the local community by facilitating residents to attend outside learning activities and inviting outsiders to participate in scheme/home activities.

Intergenerational learning. UTAS must be restructured to be able to cater for learners from the whole of the life course, organising educational activities that link third agers with children, teenagers, adults, and even

older peers. The benefits of intergenerational education are well-known. While elders can mentor individuals from the younger generation, they can also learn from the younger generation. Intergenerational contact creates an opportunity for reciprocal learning, as well as improving the everyday memory function of well older learners. Moreover, such interaction assists in dispelling stereotypes that each generation may hold about each other, whilst also encouraging respect for differences. UTAS must think outside the box to see how learners from different generations can be brought together. Activities may include book clubs, community work and film screenings. One possible avenue that UTAS may pursue is the development of grandparent-grandchild relations. There is no doubt that the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren are extremely constructive and gratifying for both sides. Whilst the majority of the grandchildren have a satisfactory relationship with their own grandparents, they also show a desire for increased contact with grandparents in terms of frequency and intensity that is especially constructed around an educational experience.

CONCLUSION

This article attempted to propose a set of principles for the renewing of UTAS in view of the coming of late modern societies. The U3E in Malta, similar to other international UTAS, represents yet another commendable effort to enhance the quality of older persons' lives by dealing with the increasing longevity, as well as contesting the erroneous suppositions that associate ageing with predestined physical and mental decline. However, a critical interpretation of the field research affirms three major problems. First, despite the invisibility of older persons in class analysis, old age is not devoid of class distinctions. Rather, older persons are located in structural and subjective class locations which condition them to struggle constantly for improved positions. Secondly, class formation and action in later life is distinguished by cultural textures and processes that take the form of social investments in and display of symbolic distinctions. Finally, older adult education is essentially a political activity, and if siding with a dominant class fraction, will form part of a large macrocosm of symbolic institutions that reproduce subtly existing power relations. For these reasons, the following six key directions were forwarded: embracing a transformational rationale, ensuring that access overcomes class, gender and ethnic biases, guaranteeing that teaching and learning strategies are skilfully suited to

older persons, promoting ICT knowledge and making greater use of eLearning techniques, extending its activities to frail and physically dependent older people especially those in residential/nursing homes, and organising activities that promote intergenerational learning. Some of this may seem fanciful to the reader. If it does, then it is worth noting that the processes advocated here are already being implemented in other UTAs, both in Europe and other continents, and I suggest that the U3E should seek their implementation through the collaboration of like-minded partners, through appropriate networks, and in a whole variety of fields.

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Recibido el 16 de marzo de 2009

Aceptado el 30 de abril de 2009