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**CONTINUATION OF SELF-DIRECTED EDUCATION
IN THE COVID-19 SITUATION
(ACCORDING TO SENIORS IN POMERANIA)**

In the spring of 2020, Poles were put before an uncomfortable situation connected to the worldwide pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. Governmental laws and the regulations introduced to counter the spread of infections negatively affected the elderly. Self-directed education inclusive of the organized seniors' learning has been suspended. The period of the pandemic stopped the possibility of active cultural and social life of seniors. The process of caring for physical and mental health, crucial for lengthening their bodies' efficiency period, has been interrupted. Problems of mental nature turned out to be the most severe effect of the isolation. Fear for life and health caused depressive states in elderly. The inability to participate in the various forms of self-directed education, so far offered by universities, has affected them severely. Seniors suffered the most from the lack of contact with other people, during and after academic classes.

Key words: coronavirus, pandemic, university of the third century, Słupsk, Ustka, social isolation, exclusion.

Czerwiakowska Jolanta. Kontynuacja edukacji bezinteresownej w sytuacji covid-19 (w opiniach seniorów na Pomorzu).

Wiosną 2020 r. Polacy zostali postawieni w niekomfortowej sytuacji związanej z ogólnościową pandemią spowodowaną koronawirusem SARS-CoV-2. Zarządzenia i regulacje wprowadzone w celu przeciwdziałania rozprzestrzeniania się zakażeń negatywnie wpłynęły na osoby starsze. Edukacja bezinteresowna obejmująca zorganizowaną naukę seniorów została zawieszona. Okres pandemii zatrzymał możliwość aktywnego życia kulturowego i społecznego seniorów. Doszło do przerwania procesu dbałości o zdrowie fizyczne i psychiczne warunkującego przedłużenie okresu ich sprawności. Najdotkliwszym efektem izolacji okazały się problemy natury psychicznej. Lęk o życie i zdrowie wywołał u seniorów stany depresyjne. Niemożność uczestniczenia w różnorodnych formach edukacji bezinteresownej oferowanych do tej pory przez uniwersytety była dla nich bardzo dotkliwa. Seniorzy najbardziej jednak odczuli brak kontaktu z innymi ludźmi w trakcie i po akademickich zajęciach.

Słowa kluczowe: koronawirus, pandemia, uniwersytet trzeciego wieku, Słupsk, Ustka, izolacja społeczna, wykluczenie.

Червяковська Іоланта. Освіта людей третього покоління під час пандемії covid-19 (з відгуках літніх людей на Поморському воєводстві).

Весною 2020 року Поляки опинилися в незручній ситуації, пов'язану із світовою пандемією коронавірусом SARS-CoV-2. Постанови та правила введені з метою утримання заражень негативно вплинуло на літніх людей. Освіта для людей третього покоління, в тому числі самоосвіта залишилася призупинена. Період пандемії затримав активне культурне і соціальне життя людей третього віку. Такі спосіб спровокував зупинку процесу піклування о своє психічне і фізичне здоров'я. Соціальна ізоляція вплинула на проблеми психічне. Страх за своє життя і здоров'я викликав депресивні стани у літніх людей. Неможливість брати участь у різноманітних формах безкорисливої освіти, пропонованих університетами, наразі була для них дуже серйозною. Однак люди похилого віку найбільше відчували відсутність контакту з іншими людьми під час та після академічних занять.

Ключові слова: коронавірус, університет третього віку, Слупск, Устка, соціальна ізоляція.

“Happiness is not only what fate gives,
but also what it does not take”

W. Grzeszczyk¹

After youth and adulthood, the next phase of human's life is the senior period. This time is associated with a decrease in efficiency of body's systems and organs, as well as the entire organism. From the biological and physiological perspective, human body undergoes gradual loss of mobility and weakening of the immune system. A steady decline in the adaptability capacity to adapt to various environmental changes occurs. In terms of socioeconomics, poverty and loneliness are common. The so-called mental old age appears. Elderly people are forced to use the help of another person. Their capacity to function in society may also be disturbed. Additional health, fitness, biological and psychological limitations place

¹Wiadysław Grzeszczyk – polish satirist and aphorist.

seniors under the stereotype of degradation and marginalization of social life.² Psychologist Erik Erikson defined the range of old age phase as between 60-65 years in the human life cycle. He described the characteristics of this period as “*a state of mind focused on achieving harmony and sense*”. According to Erikson, this balance results from accepting oneself in a new life role.³ Human found in this phase should find the purpose of his existence. Many elderly people are willing to further the knowledge, acquire new competences or improve their professional qualifications. They relatively often seek social contacts by attending universities of the third century (utw). It is particularly important for them because it gives them a sense of being someone important. Seniors do not want to be socially marginalized. They want to meet friends and be active on as many levels as possible. Old age can and should be a beautiful period, provided that the senior can be active and independent as long as possible.⁴

In late adulthood, one can participate in various forms of education: formal, informal and incidental. Formal education usually takes place in a stationary way, in schools for adults through extramural studies or through self-study. It usually ends by obtaining a certificate of completion from the school or course⁵. In contrast, informal learning takes place outside the educational system. It stems from individual need to acquire knowledge

² R. J. Kijak, Z. Szarota, *Starość między diagnozą a działaniem, [Old age between diagnosis and action]*, Warszawa 2013, s. 12-23.

³ A. Brzezińska, *Spoleczna psychologia rozwoju [Social psychology of development]*, Warszawa 2000, s. 253-279.

⁴ W. Wnuk, *Idea animacji wobec przychospolecznych problemów starzenia się, [The idea of animation in the face of pro-social problems of aging]*, Wyzwania współczesnej edukacji dorosłych [Challenges of contemporary adult education], A. Fabiś (red.), Myslowice 2007, s. 132-139; M. Kowalczyk, *O specyfice wykładowców seniorów (między andragogiką a terapią) [On the specificity of senior lecturers (between andragogy and therapy)]*, Cywilizacja i polityka [Civilization and politics], T. Dmochowski (red.) Toruń 2018, nr 1(16), s. 49-51.

⁵ M. Kowalczyk, *Kształcenie akademickie między edukacją młodzieży a późną starością [Academic education between youth education and old age]*, „Acta Humanica” Vlasta Cabanova (red.) 2/2014, s. 93-95.

and professional or life skills. Fully-fledged learning is not necessarily confirmed with a diploma or a state certificate. It takes place outside the procedure of obtaining them. Didactic theorists describe this method of education as self-directed learning. In this way, seniors can fulfil their authentic needs. Both forms of education can occur in an organized and systematic fashion or can happen somewhat incidentally. This form of education is primarily about a certain process that lasts impulsively and for any length of time. It is an opposite concept to lifelong learning that lasts continuously for many years. It applies to adults and covers almost their entire life⁶.

Self-directed education is based on independent learning of the elderly, whose superior goal is to prevent pathological aging in terms of physical and mental health. The functioning of elderly in society starts to improve and their stereotypical vision of old age is stimulated to change. It is primarily about stimulating their independence, improving the ability to cope with emerging dysfunctions and supporting coexistence in social groups. So far organized classes, under the common name of universities of the third century have helped to develop various interests⁷. They have eliminated boredom and the monotonous rhythm of life and stimulated adaptation to an intensely changing world. They allowed to complete qualifications and skills. The classes at UTW raised self-confidence and showed the elderly the meaning of life. Self-directed education gives one the opportunity to leave home and associate with other people⁸.

⁶ J. Skrzypczak, *Proces kształcenia człowieka dorosłego, [The process of adult education]*, Wprowadzenie do andragogiki, [Introduction to andragogy], T. Wujek (red.), Warszawa- Radom 2006, s. 270-307; T. Aleksander, *Kształcenie ustawiczne, [Continuing education]*, Pedagogika społeczna [Social pedagogy], T. Pilch, I. Lepalczyk (red.), Warszawa 1995, s. 295-318.

⁷ M. Kowalczyk, *Nauczyciele uniwersytetów III wieku w latach 1873-2011 [Third age university teachers in 1873-2011]*, Krakowskie Studia Małopolskie, I. Hejduk (red.), Toruń 2013, nr. 18, s. 363-366.

⁸ J. Halicki, *Zaspokajanie potrzeb edukacyjnych jako czynnik aktywnego starzenia się, [Satisfying educational needs as a factor of active aging]*, Aktywne starzenie się. Przeciwdziałanie barierom [Active aging. Counteracting barriers], P. Szukalski, B. Szatur-Jaworska (red.), Łódź 2013, s. 142-145.

The first schools for seniors initially took the form of courses, mostly related to health education. Later, the need to learn computer skills and foreign languages, especially English, arose. In a slightly later period, the need to implement classes on many levels, including artistic and scientific, was noticed. This prompted the launch of the so-called self-directed university education, especially for mature seniors. The first university of the third century in Poland was established in 1975 under the name of the “*Studium III Wieku*” in Warsaw. The word university proved to be attractive to seniors. They were willingly enrolling in a variety of classes because studying was something to be proud of⁹.

Seniors, by participating in self-directed education, primarily improve their mind and body. They develop interests, manual and general motor dexterity, learn to perform previously unknown skills and create useful things. Participants of these classes become active, get to know the world, go on trips, educate themselves, exercise memory and develop in many areas. Thanks to these activities, they break away from ordinary reality and function better. The well-being of seniors depends not only on their physical well-being, but also on the mental sphere. People in late adulthood are aware that in order to prevent “ossification of the brain”, they should constantly stimulate its structures by using the intellect. Constant exercise of grey cells, stimulating them to think improves memory and prolongs social activeness. It is also necessary to exercise in the fresh air, especially for the oxygenating power. Leaving the house helps to mobilize vitality. Getting to a lecture, exercise or having fun together create a need to improve the physical appearance. Caring for a neat appearance forces one to take care of the clothes we wear, hairstyle and personal hygiene. This leads to further engagement in activities and brings enjoyment in life.¹⁰

The main form of activity of contemporary universities of third century is organizing and conducting lectures, seminars and regular classes in

⁹ J. Halicki, *Społeczne teorie starzenia się [Social theories of aging]*, Zostawić ślad na ziemi [Leave a Mark on the Earth], M. Halicka, J. Halicki (red.), Białystok 2006, s. 255-292.

¹⁰ O. Czerniawska, B. Juraś- Krawczyk (red.), *Podróże jako projekt edukacyjny, [Travel as an educational project]*, Łódź 2001, s. 12-18.

languages, theatre, dance, music, singing, culinary, painting, gymnastic, artistic handicrafts and computer usage. Seniors can use workshops, courses and interest clubs. From the very beginning, this type of activity for seniors was very popular. The number of activities was gradually increasing. In the previous academic year 2018/2019, there had been 663 independently organised events in Poland. Participants counted up to 113.2 thousand elderly people, including 95.4 thousand women. In terms of age, the most numerous group was people between 61-75 years of age (71.9%). Most people had secondary education (50.5%). Predominantly they were on retirement (87.9%). Contemporary participation in utw, seniors' clubs, various clubs and associations is one of the forms of activity of people in later adulthood. Some of those utw operate near higher education institutions (21.5%), but most of them function independently as associations (56%). Others are open thanks to the support of local governments, operate as clubs of interests based in the Cultural Centres (17.7%), libraries and social welfare institutions (4.8%)¹¹.

In the spring, during the pandemic, the previously introduced government programs aimed at social and intellectual activation of seniors, as well as preventing their social exclusion as part of the so-called "Third Mission of the University" were suspended. The situation seniors found themselves in during the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic was called "social distancing." As time went on, the 'social isolation' during spring bothered the elderly more and more. It seemed that the lifting of the restrictions in May and the summer period would bring everything back to normal. However, in fall, after a significant increase in infections, students did not return to the university buildings. Distance learning was introduced for academic students. On the other hand, for students of self-directed education, the academic year 2020/2021 formally began, but due to the emerging fears and uncertainties, practically speaking, it did not exist. The pandemic disrupted the functioning of the social life of seniors who had attended utw until then. Most of the institutions, especially in larger cities,

¹¹K. Lewkowicz, *44 lata ruchu Uniwersytetów Trzeciego Wieku, [44 years of the Third Century Universities movement]*, Warszawa 2019 r., s. 9; Główny Urząd Statystyczny [Statistcs Poland], 2019, <https://stat.gov.pl>, [dostęp: 22.11.2020 r.].

moved with the flow and organized classes with modern multimedia equipment using social media and social messaging at a distance. The Warsaw University of the Third Century in Praga took up classes which were suspended due to the pandemic. In general, meetings of collective events were limited or abandoned, and many of them were postponed to a later date. It was proposed to log into so-called webinars, language courses and lectures. Pre-recorded lectures, concerts, access to libraries and internet reading rooms were made available, however those did not meet the need for personal contacts¹².

Until the suspension of activity, students at the University of the Third Century in Słupsk attended classes regularly. Their primary goal was to delay the aging processes (60%). They considered lectures, reading books, solving crosswords, gymnastics, outdoor activities and contact with others as the most important activities aimed at stopping unfavourably passing time (60%). Thanks to these measures, so far, they have considered their old age to be definitely successful (41%) and rather successful (59%). They were aware that the quality of their life in the current stage largely depends on themselves (37%), but less than 10% of them believed that they had no personal influence on this process. Others saw this stage of life as a complex process determined by many factors, worse brain function as one of those. They noticed a very beneficial effect of university classes on intellectual performance. Until the outbreak of the pandemic the quality of life of seniors attending the universities of the third century in Słupsk was very good. They felt happy. They fulfilled themselves in the role of students, actively participating in various activities. Through active participation in social life, they maintained physical and mental fitness (89%). Seniors believed that thanks to this, their activeness improved, and symptoms related to the delay of the aging process appeared in their bodies. They felt well-groomed, elegant, cheerful, smiling and happy. There was an improvement in short-term memory. The classes conducted so far at universities allowed seniors to forget about their unfavourable appearance

¹²*O Praskim Uniwersytecie Trzeciego Wieku [About the University of the Third Century in Prague]*, <https://wsm.warszawa.pl>, [dostęp: 29.11.2020 r.].

and not-always-so-good physical and mental well-being. Their positive attitude to life and optimism emanated and stimulated them to act.

In Pomerania, in the cities of Słupsk and Ustka, there are 4 universities designed for seniors that have been operating so far. They include a relatively large number of students. For the participants, the most important pleasure associated with the university was the opportunity to spend time together. In view of the current situation, the lack of real contacts was very painful for them. During the pandemic, Pomeranian universities of the third century were working on organizing online contacts with students, providing information on how to behave safely during a pandemic. Links supporting intellectual gymnastics were made available via the Internet. Seniors familiar with the use of multimedia platforms helped their colleagues to access various lectures, classes, webinars and competitions, which were an inspiration for creative development. The need for contact with friends and family was satisfied by telephone calls¹³.

The Centre in Ustka was founded in 2005 as the association of Ustka University of the Third Century “Żyj Kolorowo”. Currently, it has 140 students. Up until the pandemic, it organized numerous lectures, seminars and workshops, as well as domestic and foreign trips. Self-directed cultural, recreational, sightseeing and touring activities and also the active counselling for the elderly caused a wait even several years for admission to the Ustka University of the Third Century (UUTW) association. Self-help groups begun to form at the university, which were supporting the members of UUTW and other people in need in times of crisis. Seniors also were participating in widely promoted therapeutic activities, took advantage of the swimming pool, gym and physiotherapy rooms. Joint trips to sociable cafes, ice cream parlours and restaurants gave the opportunity to meet

¹³ R. Tomaszewski, *Aktywacja ludzi starszych przez edukację permanentną (program 50+i Uniwersytet Trzeciego Wieku w AP w Słupsku, [Activation of elderly people through permanent education (50+ program and University of the Third Century in AP in Słupsk]*, s. 1-4; R. Tomaszewski, *Aktywizacja osób starszych przez edukację permanentną (polsko-ukraińska perspektywa XX-XIX wieku), [Activation of the elderly through permanent education (Polish-Ukrainian perspective of the 20th-19th century)]*, maszynopisy referatów wygłoszonych na Politechnice Lwowskiej w 2017 r., s. 1-8.

and spend free time in a pleasant way. During the pandemic, all this was taken from seniors. They badly miss it all¹⁴. In the spring the usual activities: lectures, yoga, gymnastics, painting workshops, bridge games, boules games, dance and vocal workshops, hiking and cycling rallies were organised with limited capacity. Classes were held only during the early, spring lockdown (March – June 2020). All meetings were interrupted then for the summer season, as every year. Confident, that everything would return to the pre-pandemic state and that they would be able to meet at least in a smaller group, the elderly began the new academic year at the end of September. Until the gatherings were limited to 5 people, the audience met in a small group, mostly in the open air. They kept social distancing and observed safety rules during joint Nordic walking. They also organized bicycle rallies. However, the typical lectures held in the buildings and on-line were not launched. Further restrictions resulted in the loss of almost all contact possibilities. The students organized themselves in groups of several people and met on social networks. They also made frequent phone calls that allowed them to prevent loneliness¹⁵.

The University of the Third Century in Słupsk was established in November 2003. It currently has 250 students. At the beginning, it was active near the Słupsk Cultural Centre, and from 2004 it started collaboration with the Pomeranian Academy. The lectures organized so far were held in thematic blocks. Until the pandemic, seniors participated in numerous meetings with literature, music, general culture, language culture, geography, biology, health care, etc. Workshops in biological sciences and environmental protection, earth science, as well as meetings with history or lectures on ethics and various others wrapped up as general development lectures, e.g., in the field of medicine, health prophylaxis, psychology, economy and many others, attracted many interested listeners. Seniors liked the extra

¹⁴ *Uniwersytety Trzeciego Wieku w Polsce [Third Century Universities in Poland]*, <http://www.e-mentor.edu.pl/repozytorium-utw/index/wojewodztwo/11> [dostęp: 6.12.2020 r.].

¹⁵ *Oficjalna strona Usteckiego Uniwersytetu Trzeciego Wieku [The official website of the Ustka University of the Third Century]*, <http://www.zyjkolorowo.ustka.pl>, [dostęp: 29.11.2020 r.].

classes delivered in sections: biological, historical, medical, and alternative medicine, and bridge. The audience eagerly took advantage of trips to nearby areas and to further corners of our country. They were an occasion for integration meetings. A large group of elderly took part in learning foreign languages: English, German and Italian. Rehabilitation gymnastics in the open air, in the gym and in the swimming pool, in addition to the time spent together or chances for talks, provided an opportunity to develop the physical fitness of the elderly. Only, when it was impossible to participate in all those activities, did the seniors notice their unfavourable situation. The lack of contacts, movement in the fresh air, and stimuli for the brain caused a decrease in physical and intellectual efficiency¹⁶.

The Pomeranian University of the Third Century situated at the Higher School of Economy in Słupsk was established in 2012. It currently has 70 members. So far, classes have been held twice a month. Students attended classes in the fields of psychology, pedagogy, geography as well as tourism, history and cultural studies as well as health, rehabilitation and dietetics. Seniors willingly participated in the organized artistic, language, computer and photography workshops, as well as health and beauty, fashion and joint psychological-pedagogical workshops. During joint meetings, experiences and knowledge were exchanged. Seniors were meeting in the local teahouse, ice cream parlour and restaurants. They made friendships that they continued until now. Currently, they most miss conversations, games, and integration¹⁷ with seniors and the younger generation¹⁷.

The Pomeranian University of the Third Age, similarly like the Communal University of the Third Century in Redzikowo, has completely suspended its activities. Seniors do not meet at any classes. Sometimes, in their own circle of friends they talk to cheer themselves up in these difficult times. All UTW students most of all care about real meetings. During the pandemic

¹⁶ Oficjalna strona Słupskiego Uniwersytetu Trzeciego Wieku [The official website of the Słupsk University of the Third Century], <http://sutw.org/old/onas.html>, [dostęp: 29.11.2020 r.].

¹⁷ Uniwersytety Trzeciego Wieku w Polsce [*Third Century Universities in Poland*], <http://www.e-mentor.edu.pl/repozytorium-utw/index/wojewodztwo/11> [dostęp: 6.12.2020 r.].

however those became impossible. Seniors feel lonely and even, as they themselves emphasize, upset with this situation. In the borough of Słupsk and Ustka, there are plans to relaunch the senior's clubs. The intentions are to reactivate rehabilitation gymnastics, access to the swimming pool and Nordic walking. It is planned to complete the interrupted „Srebrna sieć” project, which was aimed at preventing intellectual inertia in seniors. The hope is that learning poems and songs together, playing the theatre, solving crosswords and talking to psychologists after the pandemic will help to rebuild disturbed social relations and promote mental activity.

Seniors have a strong desire to meet others, because it is associated with the need to fill in the free time that arose after ceasing active, often responsible professional work. The stereotype that the purpose of old age is to rest, functional up to that point, was broken. Seniors are aware that loneliness can turn against a person. They want to surround themselves with a group of people who feel similarly satisfied with jointly undertaken social and cultural activities. The emerging pandemic made many people realize that face to face contact cannot be replaced by any media, even modern ones. Seniors enjoyed the fact that so far, they could participate in classes at the University in Słupsk. It made them feel very important. Many of them feels the high prestige of the university. It was a desirable and attractive place for them to meet up and pursue their intellectual interests. So far, seniors have been able to take advantage of various forms of university classes¹⁸.

The pandemic has disrupted the orderly world of seniors. Isolation states a very unfavourable condition, reducing the quality of their life. It has deprived them of mental training, social, physical and mental activity. As a result, they lost their joy in life and their optimism. The inability to participate in the classes initially caused sadness and frustration (90%). All the interviewed respondents regretted that they could not participate in the utw classes. Some of them tried to activate themselves by reading books, but the information constantly flowing from the media did not allow them

¹⁸ Oficjalna strona Słupskiego Uniwersytetu Trzeciego Wieku, <http://sutw.org/old/onas.html>, [dostęp: 06.12.2020 r.].

to break away from reality. Currently, some of the elderly individually participate in webinars and workshops organized on social networks, but they emphasize that the inability to leave home has reduced their physical and mental fitness. All kinds of pains and muscle weakness appeared, due to lack of exercise. Some isolate themselves completely from reality. Fear of human contact resulted in complete isolation, which led to depression and reluctance to continue living.

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