

Learning in informal settings

SEELERNETZ: SE尼ors in Europe LEaRn in NETworks

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The demographic changes in Europe raise questions as to whether this represents an opportunity to activate the increased numbers and proportions of older people to realise their own capabilities and capacities in taking control of their lives and improving them.

Learning and educational activities have been often recommended as helping provide meaning to life after retirement. The question is whether older people are willing to participate in these educational activities. It is becoming more and more obvious that older people are excluded from current educational processes and indeed many had very low rates of early education, or education and training throughout their lives. Most of programmes of further education, post compulsory schooling, relate to the labour market and used as a way of workers gaining additional knowledge and qualifications; however older people, as workers, participate less in training courses than other age groups. Importantly few programmes of life-long-learning are connected with acquiring skills and qualifications that could improve the quality of life of older people. Additionally those older people who want to participate in such activities find few affordable and accessible pathways to life-long-learning opportunities, contributing to their social exclusion at a time of rapid social and economic changes.

Amongst the consequences of such exclusion are loneliness and depression with increased risks of health problems and a decline in mental capacity. Additionally, the absence of life-long-learning amongst older people leads to a declining participation in their own daily life decision making, leading to lower levels of self-esteem and sense of control. All the above suggest that a decline in the quality of life can take place when older people do not have the chance of participating in life-long-learning activities.

The European Project SEELERNETZ involves older people having the opportunity to participate in learning opportunities by forming social groups (networks). Five countries, Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece and Romania, although having different structures and life styles, have a similar demographic ageing in their populations. They shared a common goal in this programme of providing opportunities for older people to actively participate in finding ways to improve their quality of life. It is an educational programme for older people and by older people.

The basic concept of SEELERNETZ is that “Seniors who are not used to learning in later age are willing to participate in life-long-learning processes when they recognise that this can improve their quality of life”. Through their engagement in learning-networks the programme aimed to strengthen their competencies both to learn and act, encourage their participation in social life and thus consequently, to make a significant contribution to social change and generational solidarity. Intergenerational solidarity can only succeed if all generations actively contribute.

There were three stages in the project’s development:

Stage 1: Preparation and implementation of empirical research. A questionnaire-based research was conducted in all 5 countries. Seniors were asked about their living conditions, activities and wishes on what should be done and in what ways they could imagine themselves participating, in order to improve their lives.

Stage 2: A discussion on the results with the participants, and the development and subsequent evaluation of pilot projects in all countries, depending on the needs of the participants. A social-space approach was initiated in Germany, Austria and Romania and an activities-approach in Bulgaria and Greece. Based on the research results and the group discussions, many learning-social-networks started in all countries. Different methods were used for the organization of the pilot projects: round-tables, neighbourhood meetings, moderated seniors-meetings etc.

Stage 3: Development of the Handbook and EU-Model. The content of the recommendation handbook is based on the experiences gained in the five partner-countries through this process of developing pilot projects and activating seniors. Recommendations focus on the way in which seniors, coming together in social networks, have the opportunity to better participate in learning processes and consequently develop competencies in tackling everyday problems. The handbook and the EU-Model will be available after November 2010 on the internet site www.seelernetz.eu or as hard copies in the offices of the project partners.

The goal of the SEELERNETZ Project was to show how life long learning initiated in social networks can lead to the active participation of seniors who are socially disadvantaged and/or less educated to improve their quality of life. This has been achieved in all participating countries and will continue in the future, as seniors were ready to continue their new learning-social networks.

The project partners are: Austria (University of Vienna), Bulgaria (Technical University of Gabrovo), Germany (Research Institute of Geragogy FOGERA), Greece (50plus Hellas) and Romania (Educational Institute IREA) and the coordinator was SAT 3 (Austria).

For more information, research tools and detailed results in 5 languages (EN, DE, EL, BG, RO) please visit www.seelernetz.eu