Traditions and recent developments in learning in later life in the Russian Federation

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Abstract
After the economic and ideological changes of the 1990’s older people in Russia have become the most vulnerable, poor and disrespected group in the population. Older people are predicted to constitute almost a quarter of the Russian population in 2016. However, so called ‘people’s universities’ have long been part of the Soviet tradition and were renewed mostly for the education for older people in the post-Soviet era. Primarily they are supported by non-profit organisations and offer informal education on a range of topics and crafts. Their programmes have proved to be enjoyed by older learners and are recognised to be major contributors to active ageing in Russia. Nevertheless, their numbers and capacities are not sufficient to respond to the variety of needs and interests of older people.

This article reports on a national survey of University of the Third Age-type provision for older people in eight cities nationwide. In the Republic of Bashkortostan a region-wide programme ‘Third Age Universities for All’ came into operation in 2011. A small survey of U3A students in one city is reported. It suggests that while the programme needs to be amended in many ways, it sets a worthwhile precedent.

Current context in the Russian Federation
The number of older people has been growing in all countries both relative to other ages and in absolute numbers. In Russia, in the context of the economic transition, the slowly recovering birth rate and current life expectancy predictions, national forecasts for 2016 show that the older population will constitute almost a quarter of the population (24.8%). Medium term forecasts show that older people will increasingly constitute a higher proportion of the Russian population. Hence Russia is clearly facing all of the challenges associated with the ageing population.
The current situation of older adults in Russia remains largely defined by the nature and requirements of economic transition. One of the pertinent issues for older people is still poverty even though Government social pensions have been raised recently to exceed the official cost of living. Most pensioners today have only a state pension, because Russia is in a state of transition in its pensions system. Russia now has a combined (state-funded and private contributions) pension system, but most retired persons still receive only the state-funded part of it because they worked in the USSR. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the value of pensions plummeted. Healthcare rapidly lost the quality it used to have and quality of life deteriorated too. The principles and life styles that had been perceived as eternal and unshakeable rapidly disappeared. The ideology under which older people had lived reversed totally. Suddenly they turned out to have the wrong ideas; they were people holding to the past. Even the victory over fascism was not unquestionable anymore. This was especially true for the ‘older old’. To some extent the younger old generation, now retiring, had time to adjust to the new conditions and ideology. However, the public image of older people in the Russian Federation as low status and dependent upon state aid in order to survive the last years of their lives has become common for all retired persons.

Nevertheless, new world trends in social policies are gradually becoming incorporated into the social policies of Russia. For instance, in 2010-2011, a large number of legislative acts allowing for more variety and better quality of services in governmental institutions were adopted in most regions of the Russian Federation. Yet most of them are still focused on the compensation and basic needs approach. Just a small number of regions are trying to implement a more ‘active ageing’ approach and to introduce regional programmes which include Third Age universities, social tourism and other new ideas.

Enquiry into potential provision of later life learning in eight Russian cities

This paper offers an account of a recent (2010-11) enquiry conducted by the National Research University Higher School of Economics into conditions for realisation of the social potential of older adults at municipal level. The research was conducted in eight cities of the Russian Federation (Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Ufa, Kazan, Tuymazy, Prokopevsk, Novokuznetsk, and Oryol). What follows is an overview of older people’s learning in the Russian Federation based on data from this enquiry. It includes an indication of typical institutions in the field of learning in later life and the provision they make. There is also an exploration of the motivations of older learners and of their perceptions of the major benefits of learning, using data from the Third Age University Programme in the ‘Wisdom Ripening’ Organisation of Retired Persons, Republic of Bashkortostan.

Older people’s learning and institutional forms of provision

In each of the cities surveyed, women become eligible for the state pension at age 55 and men at 60. They are officially considered as ‘elderly’. 1103 older adults were surveyed for the research. Additionally, in each city, representatives of municipal
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authorities and governmental social welfare and non-profit organisations, whose target clients included older persons, were interviewed.

In the bigger cities (with populations of over one million) there will often be a ‘third age university’, a ‘pensioners’ university’ or a ‘people’s university’. These are special types of organisation which cannot be strictly defined as governmental or non-governmental. Some of them are based on the surviving networks of the non-governmental association Znanie (‘Knowledge’) which was widespread in the Soviet Union. Branches of this association do remain throughout the country and many provide additional education for people of pensionable age. Indeed, this association was the institution responsible for the first introduction of the idea of teaching older people in modern Russia. Some of the ‘Knowledge’ local organisations go back to the 1990s (e.g. in the city of Oryol) or even to Soviet times. The roots are in the Soviet idea of education for all. However, most of them started teaching older adults towards the end of the last decade.

Until recently, most educational programmes in the older people’s ‘universities’ consisted of series of lectures on specific topics. The most popular in 2001-2005 were gardening, politics, and healthy life style. Because of social change and some financial developments, more and more courses have been developed, especially computer basics and foreign languages, from 2006-2007 onwards.

In the second half of the 2000s government social service centres started offering learning programmes. The primary function of these centres is still, today, addressing older people’s basic needs and supporting low income, low mobility and vulnerable groups in their homes. Therefore, these centres have a certain stigma, which often causes difficulties in attracting older adults to their learning programmes.

Some later life learning programmes are organized by State universities. Most often they consist of computer courses and are based on a collaborative effort between a university and a non-governmental organisation. In the Republic of Bashkortostan, however, a Republic-wide governmental programme was launched in 2011 and financial resources were specifically allocated for teaching older people. Universities and colleges started opening more programmes for older people. Moreover, there are several instances of Third Age Universities organized by veterans’ councils. In most regions, veterans’ councils have the advantage of being granted free use of premises by local government. However, they rarely have the expertise necessary to organize a quality programme.

Grassroots organisations (for example, in Tuymazy, St Petersburg and elsewhere) also organise impressive and multi-objective programmes. Often in such organisations there is an array of other programmes for older people such as volunteering, hobby groups, advocacy groups, etc. Here, learning programmes are more diverse than those in other organisations. They may include somewhat unusual classes such as learning TV show production, journalism or poetry.

What is common for most Third Age Universities in Russia is that usually education is informal - there are no examinations, no graduation, no degrees and diplomas conferred. However, sometimes, more as an exception rather than a rule, Third Age
Universities cooperate with regular universities and issue certificates for coursework. At the current stage most of them do not provide professional development for career change, career development or improving job performance. The primary purpose is keeping people active and engaged in social life, as well as personal development. Many learners also report that these programmes help them to fulfill dreams they could not achieve while they had to earn their living.

As can be seen in Figure 1, Third Age Universities occupy an important place in older people’s lives (respondents over 55 for women and over 60 for men). Almost the same number of respondents participated in their activities as in veterans’ councils, even though veterans’ councils are sponsored by the government, enjoy free rent of premises and have been established in literally every city area and for at least 10 years longer.

**Figure 1: Participation by older people in organisations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don’t participate in any activities of any kind of organization</td>
<td>48.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensioners’ Union</td>
<td>2.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans’ Council</td>
<td>2.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of Disabled Persons</td>
<td>11.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Service Center</td>
<td>6.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobby group</td>
<td>6.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Age University or School</td>
<td>11.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political party</td>
<td>1.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amateur talent group</td>
<td>8.25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Outcomes of the municipal level survey (1103 respondents) National Research University Higher School of Economics
Provision in the Republic of Bashkortostan

Although Third Age Universities are relatively well known and have become popular among older people where they are located, state governments still do not pay enough attention to them. In most cases these universities are not supported financially. However, there are exceptions and in the Republic of Bashkortostan - as indicated above - a region-wide governmentally sponsored programme “Third Age Universities for All” came into operation in 2011. For that year, the sum of 2,200,000 rubles (about 55,000 euro) was dedicated by the state government to the regional U3A programme. The funding is available in all municipalities of the Republic and is divided according to the proportion of older people in the area. In each year, expenses have to be split between the government and an institution. State funding only covers the salaries of teachers; the remainder (premises and other related expenses) has to be covered by the institution. This is seen to be a good arrangement even though the range of courses paid for by the government is limited to four subject areas and is somewhat debatable: health, English, computer basics, psychology. Nevertheless, there is no cost to the older learners and the response has been overwhelming. In 2011, a total 16,220 older students enrolled in the programme. In fact, the demand was so high in that year, that it was not possible for all applicants to attend classes.

Figure 2 shows the most popular courses in the U3A programme of the Organization of Retired Persons “Wisdom Ripening”, located in the city of Tuymazy, Bashkortostan (http://wisdomripening.org/). It is based on a survey responses of 49 older people. It is clear that these older people are interested in a wider range of learning opportunities than offered by the state-funded menu. This suggests that it would be desirable to broaden the list of fundable courses and possibly run the programme as a grant scheme, so that non-profit organisations and educational institutions equally could develop and present programmes of most interest to older learners.
It is evident that the courses most in demand are those which allow seniors to continue to be active physically. Those courses include all kinds of activities: general physical training, all kinds of dances, walks, any gymnastics. Computer basics and English language are also in high demand, which enables us to say that older persons are willing to become as modern as their younger counterparts and that they do want to communicate with the world outside Russia.

Any licensed educational (and, from 2012, also non-governmental) organisations may engage in the state-supported programme and offer courses for older people. The drawback of the programme is that very often it is high school teachers who are supposed to do the teaching and they do not have training in teaching older learners. They are not necessarily aware of differences in the learning process relating to age. The curricula are not adjusted for older learners' needs and preferences. That can constitute a considerable problem which has to be looked at carefully. It is necessary to include in a programme development of resources for teachers and teacher training so that teaching styles and curricula can be adjusted.
However, the initiative in the Republic of Bashkortostan is probably one of the first examples of such a step from a state government and, although the programme needs to be developed in many ways, it sets the precedent and hopefully will be followed by other regions.

**Data from older learners in Bashkortostan**

Figure 3 is based on the survey responded to by members of U3A courses at Tuymazy. It is apparent that even though need for knowledge is the major reason for attending classes, it is definitely not the only reason.

**Figure 3: Older learners’ self-report of reasons for attending courses**

Source: Survey of 49 members of U3A programme of Organisation of Retired Persons “Wisdom Ripening”, Tuymazy (%)

Figure 3 shows responses to a question in which respondents were asked to choose three reasons why they attended classes. It shows that learning in later life programmes help older people to satisfy a wide range of needs, including feeling positive emotions, socialising with others, and personal and spiritual growth. A large number of the older learners also recognise that learning activity is good for their health and helps to train their memory. For many it is a fulfillment of a long-held dream. Interestingly, an important factor in choosing a course turns out to be the personality of the teacher. Such a factor definitely plays a role at all ages, but here it appears to be one of the most important factors.

72% of this group of older learners did not expect to receive any kind of certification of their studies. This can be interpreted to mean that they are not seeking for education to continue employment but rather for activities to improve their quality of life and participation in society. It is notable that, in the larger survey of over 1100 older people across Russia cited earlier, limitations through age on their right to work were mentioned frequently.
One older learner wrote in response to the survey

I am greatful to the organisers for this university. The university cheers us up, and therefore helps to stay healthy, prevents isolation. This organisation makes us closer to each other, and this is great happiness at our age. I wish all to be active and life will be marvellous.

Overall, the survey suggests that a positive effect on the wellbeing of those who attend different courses is evident. In the Tuymazy survey, a large majority (c.95%) responded that they enjoy classes and feel “excellent” or “good” after attending them.

The same conclusion is given colour by comments written in by older learners

Here I have gained myself the way I deserve.

Thank you for the opportunity to extend my life beyond my home.

Our time requires developing yourself. These courses help me.

I started going to the U3A from its start. I was mostly interested in technical skills such as computer skills and camera work. I had to work hard, I often had to study at home. I have managed to learn what I wanted. Thanks to everyone.

I started going to the U3A in 2010. I like it very much. I attend singing, physical training. We recently had a celebration. It was great. We danced, sang, socialised, listened to music. I’d also like to go for trips to other cities. Let’s live happily! We only live once.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that learning in later life programmes are gaining popularity and becoming more visible in the Russian Federation. In some cases they are supported financially by the regional and local governments. However, state-supported programmes are usually not as flexible as those offered by non-profit organisations. The way forward appears to lie in compromise and development so that state funding support and non-profit leadership and expertise are combined in a steady increase of programmes of learning in later life appropriate and feasible for the expanding population of older learners in the Russian Federation.

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Key Words

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