

Age against the machine: active ageing and guest learning on campus

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Abstract

This paper offers a brief overview of ‘the guest student’ initiative, established in countries like Germany, and highlights its potential to support those in later life – or the ‘third age’ – in particular. In a nutshell, where the initiative is supported, universities open up selected lectures to the public which they, as ‘guest students’ (Gasthörer:innen), can apply to attend. The paper considers how UK third age citizens are supported (e.g. through the U3A initiative) and how universities might think about supporting their communities in a post-pandemic world.

Keywords

ageing; civic university; welfare; adult learning; continuing education; andragogy

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Guest students on campus

Entering university reflects a life-changing opportunity and several institutions have established flexible, non-formal routes to education, often via the provision of short courses and one-day workshops. However, universities are well placed to optimise further the opportunities for participation, learning and health in their region. In this paper, we offer a brief overview of ‘the guest student’ initiative, established in countries like Germany, and discuss their potential to support those in later life – or the ‘third age’ – in particular. In a nutshell, where the initiative is supported, universities open up selected lectures to the public which they, as ‘guest students’ (*Gasthörer:innen*), can apply to attend.

Guest students in Germany: an outline

There were 37,422 registered *Gasthörer:innen* in German universities in 2018/19, rising steadily from 33,644 in 2014/15 (Statista, 2019). Anyone can apply to the guest studies programme (*Gasthörer:innenstudium*) and no prior qualifications are required.

Gasthörer:innen do not sit exams and, rather than a formal qualification, they receive an official attendance document. *Gasthörer:innen* can opt to attend lectures in a variety of disciplines, for example, Rathmann and Bertram (2016) found that the most visited lectures at Leibniz University Hannover were in philosophy, psychology, history, art and sociology. Moreover, data has revealed that across those German universities supporting the initiative, a majority of the participants are people who are in retirement (Statista, 2019). The University of Cologne (2018), which has administered *Gasthörer:innenstudium* for over 30 years, underscored this by publishing a testimonial from a retiree in their course prospectus:

Lifelong learning is not only a slogan for me, but one I have practiced it all my life. Thus,

in my older age after retirement, I became a guest student at university. I did not go to university in my earlier life. I had initially considered to study a particular topic full time, but then decided to enjoy the flexibility, without the pressure of exams, and to study a variety of different topics. (Translated from the German)



Whilst *Gasthörer:innenstudium* are not limited to people in later life, the experiences in countries like Germany provides a stimulus to HE providers in the UK to refine – or to rethink – how they connect with their communities, whatever their age profile.

The third age

In examination of the population structure in the UK, from the mid 2018 dataset, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) characterised the UK as an “increasingly ageing” society. The data highlighted some interesting spikes, including one at age 71 years, reflecting the baby boom after World War Two, and another peaking at age 53 years, reflecting the baby boom of the 1960s. This sense of an ageing society is amplified by a narrowing in teenage years, which is attributed to low birth rates around the millennium (ONS, 2019). The rapidity of this change in UK society has been considered for some time. For example, at the turn of the century, the United Nations (2001) – whose data was informed the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) policy

framework on ‘active ageing’ (see below) – estimated that nearly 30 per cent of the UK population would be aged 60+ by 2025: in 2002, the proportion of those aged 60+ was closer to 20 per cent of the population.

The third age has been euphemistically tagged as ‘the golden years of adulthood’ – and it roughly spans the period from the age of 65 to 80 (Barnes, 2011). Generally, better healthcare, medication and ability to minimise ill-health has led to people living longer and relatively healthier lives. However, the third age has caused something of a quandary for policymakers as social understanding of this group is still relatively novel in human history (*ibid.*). Rubinstein (2002) recognised the third age as being a period of developmental ambiguity: how do you address the needs of those who are both ‘old in age and not old in age’ – the “young old” (Barnes, 2011)?

This uncertainty is reflected in funding to support education for people in later life. For instance, whilst the 2019 Chancellor’s Spending Round allocated £400m to further education, including a £190m package for core funding for 16-19 year olds (HM Treasury, 2019), nothing was stated in relation to the older person. Yet, as the Cologne testimonial underlines, the capacity and capability to learn remains strong in the third age (*cf.* Boulton-Lewis, 2010).

Programmes such as the Gasthörerstudium help address the challenges outlined in the WHO’s policy framework on ‘active ageing’. Active ageing “allows people to realise their potential for physical, social and mental wellbeing throughout the life course and to participate in society according to their needs, desires and capabilities” (WHO, 2002: 12). The WHO highlighted ‘participation’ as one of the key pillars in the determinants of active

ageing and, with reference to this, identified lifelong learning for people as they age as a major enabler (p. 51).

Where we are

In spite of significant cuts to funding and shifting priorities, some universities have continued to offer structured and *ad hoc* learning programmes in their local community – which may engage people in later life - via extramural, ‘non degree’ or continuing education. Bodies like the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) have established a strong network to support community engagement and this has informed and driven a policy agenda in community-based learning and education (UALL, ND). In addition, many institutions organise public lectures, and there has been an emphasis in the auditing of these institutional interactions with the local community (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020). However, these public lectures are significantly different to the lectures in Gasthörerstudium, as the latter are already scheduled in a course timetable. Thus, Gasthörer sit in the same lecture hall as the university student, though they are passive listeners or observers rather than active learners.

A more co-operative mode of learning, and is the signature pedagogy of a distinct national network with a university moniker, is the UK University of the Third Age (U3A). U3A, which is a global movement, took root in the UK in the early 1980s, to offer self-help to people no longer in full-time employment. (In other words, whilst the U3A programme attracts people in later life, it appeals to those who may be carers or who are raising a family etc., but have the time to pursue other interests.) Citing Allman (1984), Marsden (2011) explains that the UK U3A approach to learning is reflected in the ideas of Paulo Freire and

Antonio Gramsci, wherein, there is an andragogic approach in which,

Learning is a process wherein adults come together to think, to question and reflect on what they know or on areas of content, that is, what others think they know, and then to test this against and within experience (Allman, 1984: 83).

There are over 1,000 local, independently run U3A branches in the UK with thousands of interest groups (“from art to zoology”) and more than 400,000 members (U3A, ND). Overall, what is offered by the UK U3A, whilst overlapping with some activities offered by their university counterparts, is distinct and serves a particular purpose – to instil greater civic or community cohesion, upskill and to enhance wellbeing.

Points for consideration

The 37,000+ registered Gasthörer*en is dwarfed by the 2.9 million students enrolled in German universities at the beginning of the 2019/20 academic year/‘winter semester’ (Statista, 2020). Given the modest scale of activity, Gasthörer*enstudium can be thought to be symbolic.

Examining social and educational policies and practices in one country and applying it in another is fraught with difficulties, as different cultures abide: in Germany there is significant state intervention that has resulted in the lack of tuition fees at public universities, whereas in England, the tuition fees has shifted senses of the university experience. In short, this focus has entrenched economic benefit of HE to individuals, rather than the broader social or intrinsic benefits of education. In very crude terms, as the lecture becomes a commodified entity, how problematic might

it be for fee-paying students to ‘accept’ (non-fee paying) guest students in the lecture hall? In annual surveys to undergraduates, it has been found that lectures are highly valued, and when contact hours (particularly lectures) are reduced or when classes exceed 50 learners, dissatisfaction soars (HEPI/HEA, 2015).

Whilst it may be tempting to ponder Gasthörer*enstudium in relation to the social mobility agenda, conflating the two is problematic. To apply a Bourdieusian interpretation, the ‘highbrow’ cultural taste of a university lecture could cement and reflect class divisions in the social space (Bourdieu, 1984 [2010]). To illustrate this, notwithstanding the slightly different context, Nojima (1994) noted how divisions arose between senior citizens enrolled at academic classes in Advanced Studies Centres (*Choju Gakuen*) in Japan and their peers undertaking classes in local community centres (*kominkans*), operating along the lines of a UK U3A branch (“[offering classes in] traditional crafts and various hobbies as well as recreation.”): “Sadly, upon returning to their communities [Choju Gakuen senior citizens] are viewed as outsiders by the other senior citizens who have continued attending classes at the local kominkans” (p. 467).

Moving forward

COVID-19 has stress-tested several communities and the narrative of the ‘therapeutic university’ (Guan et al., 2016) may be more prominent from 2021. We already see this in new (or enhanced) support structures (e.g. counselling, personal tutoring) and curricula changes (e.g. greater coaching and mentoring, resilience and employability modules). Might this narrative extend beyond the arc of the under/postgraduate student? Whilst we may never see a return to the same scale of

extramural/community education once delivered by several universities, the pandemic has alerted us to the value of education as social prescription and how important it is for universities align more strongly with their local community.

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The UPP Foundation (2018) noted the civic role of universities. If a third of the UK population will be aged 65+ by 2025, and then swelled in number by the retirement of the 1960s baby boomers, it is worth considering the UPP Foundation's cautionary note:

[An ageing society] will put an increasing burden on working age people – but as importantly it will mean that efforts to make an older population healthy and productive will be of increasing importance (ibid.: 25).

Education is one way of improving the mental health of older people but, as countries like Japan have demonstrated, academic programmes for the older person have been developed which has enabled several to assume leadership responsibilities, thus making a telling contribution in their local communities (Nojima, 1994). As COVID-19 has revealed, it is time to take active ageing seriously and there is an opportunity for universities to refine their civic mission and priorities.

Sylvia Terbeck is Senior Lecturer in Psychology with an interest in intergroup relations and moral decision making. Sylvia has led outreach activity to ensure members of the public are engaged and made aware of the work of researchers, and the impact this work has on their everyday lives.

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