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### European Union Policy on Older Adult Learning: A Critical Commentary

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## European Union Policy on Older Adult Learning: A Critical Commentary

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*This critical commentary discusses the strengths and lacunae in the European Union's policy on older adult learning. Late-life learning is deemed as a productive investment on the basis that it not only engenders positive returns of economic growth but also improves the quality of life and social development of older persons. This article argues that although European Union policy on lifelong learning does hold some promise toward more optimum levels of physical, psychological, and social well-being in later life, it remains characterized by a range of limitations ranging from mindless activism, to economic bias, to ageism.*

**KEYWORDS** *European Union policy, lifelong learning, older adult learning*

Older adult learning has gained a solid presence in international and national policies on lifelong learning. It is regarded as a necessary lubricant to keep a dynamo of opportunity and activity in the lives of older adults functioning affectively (Schuller, 2010). This is especially the case for the European Union (EU), where continuous learning through life is regarded as a comprehensive strategy to meet the requirements for a single European market and address the repercussions of increasing structural unemployment. Cognizant of the aging of European society—due to falling birth rates, shrinking family sizes, fewer numbers of young people in the labor market, and increasing life expectancies—recent EU directives on lifelong learning advised formal

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and nonformal learning providers of education to plan and implement further educational opportunities for older adults (European Commission [EC], 2006a, 2007). Indeed, the EU considers late-life learning a positive investment on the basis that it not only engenders positive returns of economic growth, but also improves the quality of life and social development of older persons. This article presents a critical commentary of EU policy on older adult learning in six parts. While the first introduces the key dynamics of older adult learning, the second focuses on EU policy on lifelong and late-life learning. The next three parts provide a constructive critique of such policy by focusing on its social, economic, and ageist biases, followed by a conclusion that looks to the future of lifelong learning.

### OLDER ADULT LEARNING

Older adult learning refers to the process in which older adults, “individually and in association with others, engage in direct encounter and then purposefully reflect upon, validate, transform, give personal meaning to and seek to integrate their ways of knowing” (Mercken, 2010, p. 9). Although the reaching of one’s 50th birthday is sometimes taken to signify the onset of later life and an individual’s transition from middle age to older adulthood (e.g., Schuller, 2010), chronological age is only useful in making sense and ordering large sets of quantifiable data and, as such, tells researchers nothing about how it feels to be old. A more pertinent definition treats later life as a unique phase in the life cycle, therefore encompassing social and psychological transitions in addition to physical changes. To this effect, this article follows Withnall and Percy’s (1994, p. 4) definition of older adults as “people, whatever their chronological age, who are post-work in the sense that s/he is no longer involved in earning a living or with the major responsibilities for raising a family.”

Older adults constitute a minority in postsecondary and tertiary studies. For instance, a study on higher education in the United Kingdom found that during the 2008–2009 academic year, only some 4,000 first-year students (0.7% of total) aged 50 and older were enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate courses (Phillipson & Ogg, 2010). This age group was better represented with respect to part-time study, comprising 15% and 10% of part-time undergraduates and postgraduates, respectively, which, in numerical terms, totaled up to 62,000 students (Phillipson & Ogg, 2010). On the other hand, nonformal learning avenues have always been highly successful in attracting older adults. Indeed, the past 3 decades saw a steep proliferation of third-age learning programs catering exclusively to the interests of older adults. The appeal of nonformal learning lies in the opportunity to engage in serious learning projects, socialize with peers, and engage in physical and cognitive activities but without any pressures of accreditation

and assessment. Older persons are also extensively involved in informal modes of learning in a variety of contexts, ranging from the family, religious institutions, mass media, the workplace, and volunteering, to various community-based initiatives, as well as through the creative use of museums, theatres, libraries, online surfing, and travel.

Comparative data on participation rates are sporadic and tend to be unreliable and noncomparable since they include different definitions of “nonformal” and “informal” learning. Yet, a review of the literature elicits three persistent findings: a lower percentage of older learners compared to younger peers, a sharp decline of participation as people reached their seventh decade, and the finding that typical learners are middle-class women—the working classes, older men, and elders from ethnic minorities are highly underrepresented (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). Various propositions have been put forward to explain why participation declines with age, and the consensus is that potential participants face four types of barriers. These include situational obstacles (relating to the unique circumstances of later life), institutional obstacles (unintended barriers that exclude subaltern elders), informational obstacles (failure to communicate what learning is available), and psychosocial obstacles (attitudinal beliefs and perceptions that inhibit persons’ participation). For many years, older adults have been stereotyped as engaging in more *expressive* than *instrumental* forms of learning. This developed out of the assumption that in retirement people prefer to devote time to personal development tasks as opposed to learning vocational skills associated with the labor market. However, this narrow and binary approach to describe educational participation in later life is obsolete in contemporary times. While in the United Kingdom “information technology” has superseded the humanities as the most popular subject, with more than half the learners older than 65 claiming “computer skills” as their main subject of study (Aldridge & Tuckett, 2010), a Canadian survey found older learners to be highly goal-oriented so that participation in technological learning programs ranked highest among respondents (Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2004).

A key debate in older adult learning is concerned not with whether we can or cannot teach or retrain an older adult but to what end and why (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). Late-life learning was commended for aiding adults to adjust to the transformations that accompany old age, such as decreasing physical strength and health, the retirement transition, reduced income, death of a spouse, and changing social and civic obligations. Others posited a more radical agenda and bestow late-life learning with the task of achieving the “liberation of elders,” that is, empowering older persons with the advocacy skills necessary to counteract the social and financial disadvantages brought on by neoliberal politics of aging. Humanist adult educators perceived late-life learning as a personal quest, a necessary activity if older adults are to achieve their potentials. This rationale prioritizes process over

content by stressing that the role of an educator is to facilitate the process of learning for the learner rather than to persuade him or her to social action or to be dissatisfied if a certain political awareness is not achieved. Finally, transcendence rationales argue that learning must not let older adults forget that they are old and to enable them to know themselves as “whole” persons, as they really are, in the light of finitude, and at the horizon of death. Learning thus arises as an opportunity to explore goals that younger peers are too busy to pursue, such as developing a reflective mode of thinking and contemplating the meaning of life.

Although these rationales include various valid arguments, it is also possible that they miss the point. Industrial societies have now reached a late phase of modernity, wherein people’s lives are characterized by instability and risk and, hence, personal and social disorientation. In Bauman’s words (2005a, p. 303), “Society is being transformed by the passage from the ‘solid’ to the ‘liquid’ phases of modernity, in which all social forms melt faster than new ones can be cast.” While in the past the aging self was based on occupational biographies and incumbents’ relationship to the welfare state, now “The old have moved into a new ‘zone of indeterminacy’ [so that] growing old is itself becoming a more social, reflexive and managed process, notably in the relationship between the individual, the state and a range of public as well as private services” (Phillipson & Powell, 2004, pp. 21–22). Yet, the aforementioned rationales persist in operating within grand narrative frameworks that embed older adult learning in strict and therefore limiting ideological constraints. Overcoming such a lacuna necessitates the shifting of “the debate away from the policy maker and practitioner perspectives on *education* towards *learning* [to] ensure that the voices of older learners themselves, hitherto largely ignored, can emerge.” (Withnall, 2006, p. 30; italics in original). Indeed, what is needed is “a more comprehensive analysis of all the various dimensions and features of the nature, aims, and purposes of policies for realizing a lifelong approach to learning for all” (Aspin & Chapman, 2000, p. 16). Following Withnall (2010, p. 116), this warrants that late-life learning brings the “need for economic progress and social inclusiveness in tandem with recognition of individual desires for personal development and growth as people age.” It is against such an epistemological backdrop that the EU directives on older adult learning will be examined and discussed.

## EU POLICY AND OLDER ADULT LEARNING

In recent years it has become virtually impossible to locate a policy document issued by the EC that makes no reference to lifelong learning. Of course, it is erroneous to think that lifelong learning emerged onto the EU policy scene with the suddenness of a new fashion. Indeed, the idea was widely touted

in the late 1960s and even experienced a degree of political flavor in the early 1970s. Indeed, any discussion on the EU's take on lifelong learning will be remiss if it overlooks the fundamental role of other intergovernmental bodies. In particular, the UNESCO report *Learning to Be* (Faure et al., 1972), as a public statement on the principles of lifelong education, was crucial in fostering a global debate. Education was postulated to “last the whole life for *all* individuals and not just be tacked on to school or university for a privileged or specialized few” (Field, 2000, p. 6) and, hence, serve to “initiate an optimistic phase of international education policy and reform” (Knoll, quoted in Field, 2000, p. 6).

The EU responded to such an international debate by commissioning its own policy enquiry. A 1974 communication on education in the European Community put forward the concept of *education permanente*, that is, “planned learning from cradle form grave,” where “the Community’s specific responsibilities within this strategy should include promotion of foreign languages, staff and student exchanges between schools and universities . . . through each individual’s working life” (Field, 1998, p. 30). Yet, the limited power of the EC over member states’ educational policies meant that during the 1980s there were no major developments. A key milestone occurred when the EC subsequently declared 1996 to be the European Year of Lifelong Learning and published a series of directives that left no doubt as to the lynchpin status of lifelong learning in EU socioeconomic policy. This fixation on lifelong learning reflects two key facets of the EU’s modus operandi: economic competitiveness and citizenship. On one hand, the EU shares the dominant global concern with regard to the strategic importance of lifelong learning in meeting the challenges of globalization and the emergence of knowledge economies. On the other hand, the EU believes that lifelong learning holds the potential to unite the member states of this diverse continent into a coherent whole.

Early in this millennium, the EC published the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (EC, 2000) and *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* (EC, 2001, p. 33) where lifelong learning was defined as “all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment related perspective.” In June 2002, the European Council of Heads of State and Governments adopted a Resolution on Lifelong Learning as the guiding principle for the reform of education and training in the member states, which argued that lifelong learning is an “indispensable means for promoting social cohesion, active citizenship, personal and professional fulfillment, adaptability, and employability” (Commission of the European Communities [CEC], 2002, p. 1). Furthermore, it was underlined that lifelong learning “should enable all persons to acquire the necessary knowledge to take part as active citizens in the knowledge society and the labour market” (CEC, 2002, p. 1.).

Older persons were a late entry in policy documents. It was only in 2006, some 11 years after the first policy document, that late-life learning was first mentioned. This was during a time when the EU was expressing serious reservations about whether member states were making adequate progress toward the targets of economic growth and job creation established in Lisbon. One key preoccupation was the decreasing average age at which older persons exited from the labor force into retirement, especially when statistical projections anticipate further decreases in the number of younger Europeans (younger than 24 years) in the coming decades (EC, 2006b). Arguing that the participation of older workers in the workforce is vital to the development of socially inclusive economies and the reduction of the risk of social exclusion among the older population, the EU issued directives calling for active employment policies to discourage older workers from leaving the workforce and the development of incentives to continue working (CEC, 2004). Although the key argument was that lifelong learning and access to training must provide older workers with the necessary skills to adapt to changes on the employment market, with the EU encouraging member states to use the European Social Fund to develop active labor market policies (CEC, 2004), the subsequent documents *Adult Learning: It Is Never Too Late to Learn* (EC, 2006a) and *Action Plan on Adult Learning* (EC, 2007) attempted to develop a more holistic approach. Stressing that the growing numbers of retirees in Europe should be regarded as potential sources of educators and trainers for adult learning, the former posited two objectives for lifelong learning as far as older adults are concerned: “a need for up-skilling and increasing lifelong learning opportunities for older workers” and “an expansion of learning provision for retired people . . . including for instance increasing participation of mature students in higher education” (EC, 2006a, pp. 8–9). The *Action Plan on Adult Learning* (EC, 2007) reiterates the assumption that in a knowledge-based and aging society, access to lifelong learning is a condition for both economic growth and social cohesion. Although it calls upon member states to ensure sufficient investment in elder learning, it is disappointing that the document does not address the issue of late-life learning in any specific detail. *The Action Plan* provides very generic pledges: (1) to reduce labor shortages due to demographic changes, (2) to address the problem of early school leavers, (3) to reduce poverty and social exclusion, (4) to increase the integration of migrants in society and labor market, and (5) to address that participation in learning decreases after the age of 34.

Of course, a serious bone of contention concerns the significance of EU regulations and directives for its member states. On one hand, EU directives lay down end results that must be achieved in every member state but without dictating the means of achieving that target. On the other hand, EU regulations are legislative acts that become immediately enforceable as law in all member states simultaneously. As far as lifelong learning is concerned,

policies are of a directive nature. Although the EU has the authority to dictate both rationales and targets in lifelong learning, it remains powerless as regards the extent that member states work actively and seriously toward the achievement of such ideals. This is not, however, the same as saying that the EU applies no pressure in steering member states toward its policy vision. Pressure is generally applied through the open method of coordination, which functions, in practice, as the EU's chief "carrot and stick" strategy. While the "stick" takes the form of the publications of indicators comparing achievements of different countries, an act that creates peer pressure through naming and shaming, the "carrot" constitutes the provision of human and financial resources to states who coordinate projects incorporating EU objectives. This created a situation whereby it is the politically weaker and less affluent member states that strive hard to follow the rationales and achieve the targets issued in directives, since such an engagement functions to improve their social and political status in the EU community, as well as boosting their sparse levels of human and financial resources.

In an attempt to link policy with practice, as well as aiding member states to reach the directives' objectives, the EU coordinates the Grundtvig program that provides funding for projects on lifelong learning. Priority 6 in the Grundtvig guide pledges financial resources to learning programs related to teaching and learning in later life and intergenerational and family learning (EC, 2010). Over the last 10 years, the Grundtvig program has supported many projects aimed at promoting active aging and solidarity between generations. The breadth of funded projects is impressive as a recent mapping exercise identified some 200 initiatives covering a range of learning activities, but mostly, e-learning, intergenerational learning, and volunteerism among older persons (Soulsby, 2010). Grundtvig projects offer a number of clear benefits such as recognizing that older adults are valuable human capital, that in the context of population aging lifelong learning is a necessity rather than a luxury, and that both computer and intergenerational learning offer a great potential for active aging. Another benefit includes the mobilization of national senior organizations to involve themselves in policy for late-life learning, hence, a change from a "top-down" to a "bottom-up" approach to policy making. Instead of waiting for policy makers to become aware of issues around education for older adults, funded programs prompt initiatives and actions that would put pressure on the policy makers at national and local levels to acknowledge the magnitude of the human capital represented by older adults.

#### THE LIMITS OF ACTIVITY RATIONALES

EU policy and funding priorities laud late-life learning for its potential to aid older adults remaining active and find new roles following the end of



work and independence of children. This is a valid argument because many older adults have substantiated how late-life learning helped them to adjust to, and at times overcome, the physical, social, and psychological challenges brought on by the onset of later life. However, such a rationale has its own limitations. One key lacuna consists of its support of an ideological construction of later life where, to paraphrase Mills (1959), public issues are projected as private troubles. It is unfair to expect older persons to solve the contemporary problems associated with retirement when such issues surfaced only as the result of wider, structural predicaments. Hence, rationales for late-life learning remain incomplete unless they are framed in terms of a discussion of appropriate provision on behalf of the state for both active and excluded elders. This is because, regardless of older persons' interests and yearning for learning opportunities, structural circumstances continue to have great impacts on the extent of participation in older adult learning.

A general disinterest in participating in learning activities on behalf of nontypical learners—working-class men, elders living in rural areas, and elders from ethnic minorities—does not suffice as a complete justification for their invisibility in learning programs. For instance, one study on working-class participants' access to and experience of learning programs found interviewees highly motivated to acquire new knowledge (Findsen & McCullough, 2008). It is thus more plausible that certain features of the way elder learning programs are organized are somehow acting as barriers to the enrollment of working-class elders whose life situation tends to be characterized by at-risk-of-poverty lifestyles (Formosa, 2009). The low percentage of older men signals strongly that for a number of reasons, opportunities for late-life education are not attractive to them. Primarily, third-age learning activities are promoted in venues such as health programs on the broadcasting media or through leaflets at health centers, where most of the clients are women. Second, late-life learning tends to be "feminized," where membership is not only mostly female, but so are management committees (Williamson, 2000, p. 63). As Scott and Wenger (1995) stated, older men tend not to want to become involved with old people's organizations they perceive to be dominated by women. Third, courses tend to reflect the interests of the dominant female membership. Although no comparative studies on curricula in late-life learning are available, it is noteworthy that Golding, Foley, and Brown (2007, p. 7) note how in Australia, "adult and community education tends to be underpinned by feminist pedagogies and practice that tends not to encourage or welcome working class masculinities and pedagogies." One's residential location is also an important variable to consider; only a very limited number of learning programs tend to be available in rural areas, that is, farms, towns, and small cities located outside urban or metropolitan areas. Research finds that living in rural areas arises as a strong barrier to participation in late-life learners since residents find it difficult to travel to metropolitan areas (Mott, 2008). Many rural elders (especially

women) neither have a driving license nor own a car, and public transport tends to be limited in rural areas. The absence of outreach work on behalf of formal and nonformal education providers means that rural elders are generally left out in the cold, with state subsidies and volunteering activities being disproportionately biased in favor of those living in metropolitan areas.

EU policies on older adult learning are characterized by unwarranted optimism as far as participation is concerned when it is clear that opportunities to learn are not evenly distributed. Although we can celebrate that life expectancy is increasing, and with it the opportunities to live an active life, some groups of older persons are at a higher risk for social exclusion. Indeed, the Grundtvig program is biased by an urge to showcase the potential of well-educated, healthy, and affluent seniors while overlooking the increasing dependency ratios and that as much as 19% of persons aged 65 and older in the EU (a total of 16 million) experience at-the-risk-of-poverty lifestyles (Zaidi, 2010). As Parent (2010, p. 88) emphasized, it is important that Grundtvig “respond[s] more effectively to the very diverse and evolving needs of older people and the challenges to many of them posed by financial constraints, social exclusion, lack of basic skills, digital illiteracy, and discrimination.” While ensuring that the freedom of those who choose not to be included is not taken away, policy has the obligation to facilitate the inclusion of persons who, shackled by structural inequalities, are unable to participate. This warrants the drawing of inclusive strategies that overcome class-, ethnic-, and gender-specific barriers hindering the realization of a more democratic version of elder-learning practice. Financial support and funding should be made available to help those with least initial schooling and those with the lowest levels of income. Achieving a lifelong learning for all necessitates a widening participation agenda where policy makers and providers think out of the box to attract older adults who would not usually participate in traditional organized provision. The achievement of this objective will indeed be facilitated if the EU mandates local authorities and voluntary agencies a clearer role in the coordination and development of older adult learning.

## THE IDEOLOGY OF PRODUCTIVE AGING

Another positive aspect of EU policy is a strong commitment to portray aging in a positive light and especially to highlight the potential of an aging population. In this sense, it provides a welcome respite from traditional policies on social and healthcare that support the stereotypes of frail elders and the view of older persons as dependent members of our population. Learning is treated as a key strategy in bringing unprecedented levels of productive aging, which refers to any activity “that contributes to producing goods and services or develops the capacity to produce them” (Caro, Bass, & Chen,

1993, p. 6). Such activities “are social valued in the sense that, if one individual or group did not perform them, there would be a demand for them to be performed by another individual or group” (Bass & Caro, 2001, p. 37). The EU’s position is admirable as it affirms a cultural ideal, one promoting the idea that older adults can be productive, hence counteracting the stereotypes of older adult as “greedy geezers.”

The problem, however, is that such commendable rationale is not embedded in a wide range of possible productive lifestyles—ranging from volunteering and informal care to independent living—but solely in the sphere of paid employment. Human capital theory is a key driving point in the EU’s vision on lifelong and later learning, as it is assumed that there will be economic payoffs if a society broadens access and opportunities for lifelong learning. Indeed, it is the “future worker-citizen” rather than the “democratic-citizen who is the prime asset of the social investment state,” so that one locates a strong interdependence between citizenship and employability (Lister, 2003, p. 433). The position promulgated in EU policy for late-life learning is unashamedly economic, where the solution to the aging problem is put as simply as finding a way for older people to be economically useful. Yet, it is noteworthy that there is hardly any evidence to support the usefulness of a strong human capital theory for older persons (Cole, 2000). The increase of opportunities for late-life learning does not result in a surge of older persons going back into either full- or part-time employment but only a rise in pensioners becoming increasingly active in community and civic engagement affairs. The EU’s extensive drive to improve the e-learning skills of older people is also problematic because doing so neglects the whole range of abilities of the aging population. Indeed, the dominant emphasis toward e-learning that weaves through Grundtvig-funded projects in late-life learning is, ultimately, nothing more than a response to a “skills crisis” in information and communication technology that characterizes older cohorts in European society. The net result of this European hysteria around information technology skills is an increase in public financing of private needs in an area of human resources that is crucial to latter-day capitalism so that private and public interests and concerns are slowly becoming one (Borg & Mayo, 2005). As Bauman (2005b) points out, the task of achieving a more inclusive, tolerant, and democratic society marked by greater participation, higher reported well-being, and lower criminality seems like an afterthought in the EU’s documents on lifelong learning, as some kind of natural consequence of a full labor market.

The EU vision on late-life learning never escapes the greater project to render Europe more competitive in the face of fierce competition from the transitional and multinational corporations’ ability to reap the advantages of economies of scale through expansion of international capital mobility. Human experience is surrendered to the controls of the market, so that any notion of meaning detached from “work” and not defined according to

capitalist logic simply disappears. This stance is not surprising considering that from the very beginning the EC (2001, p. 6) posits the need to expand lifelong education and learning in terms of the “competitive advantage,” that is, increasingly dependent on investment in human capital and on knowledge and competences becoming a “powerful engine for economic growth.” However, aiding older people to remain in paid work represents only one goal among others for late-life learning, with other possible objectives being recognizing the diversity of older persons, challenging stereotypes of aging, maximizing social inclusion, maintaining personal independence, and retaining a sense of purpose and meaning. This does not mean that policies seeking to improve the skills of older adults should be thrown out, since the crucial role of paid work to well-being is well documented, but instead to stress that the vocationalization of late-life learning will not on its own solve the future structural lag in employment or unsustainability of pensions. As highlighted elsewhere so that the integration of older persons in the labor market becomes a real possibility, policies must break down barriers to labor market entry with active and preventive measures such as job search assistance, guidance, and training (Formosa, 2010). It is hoped that in the foreseeable future EU policy on late-life learning embraces a broader perspective of citizenship, one that includes both political and social rights. However, this goal will not be achieved by any type of learning environment, and I join other critical educators (e.g., Findsen, 2007) in stressing the importance of educators and learners to embrace a transformative rationale that not only dissects the realities surrounding older citizens but also enables them to imagine and work together toward the realization of a social world governed by life-centered values rather than the ideology of the market. Late-life learning has huge potential to expand opportunities for civic engagement for those older persons who choose such a path and wish to partake in volunteerism that is generally expected from older generations.

### THE LIMITS OF THIRD AGEISM

Another limitation of EU policy and Grundtvig funding priorities constitutes their celebration of third-age learning at the expense of older and more defenseless people, namely, those in the fourth age. In Weiss and Bass's words (2002, p. 3), the third age is described as a “life phase in which there is no longer employment and child-raising to command time, and before morbidity enters to limit activity and mortality brings everything to a close.” On the other hand, the fourth age refers to “the age of frailty, dependency and being in need of care” (MacKinlay, 2006, p. 12).

The rationale underpinning fourth-age learning is that dependent older adults still hold varied cognitive needs and interests. Aldridge (2009) reports on the UK context, which includes programs such as the *Music for Life*

program consisting of regular weekly activities including quizzes, puzzles, and games and discussions and *The Signatures Project*, which engages older migrants in an 8-week project to assist them in developing their written signatures and learning to print their names. Fourth-age learning has also been developed with homebound elders, with most programs providing distance learning through radio, television, and especially, the Internet (Gagliardi, Mazzarini, Papa, Giulia, & Marcellini, 2008). Programs providing learning opportunities to older persons at different stages of dementia have also registered varying degrees of success (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). However, and notwithstanding this rich vein of literature, EU policy on late-life learning overlooks how rising life expectancies warrant new learning needs and interests among the oldest and most frail sectors of the older population. It is assumed that only healthy older adults are capable of engaging in learning initiatives, and no call is made for governments to reach those persons who, due to various physical and/or cognitive challenges, are precluded from participating in lifelong learning. Indeed, there seems to be no place for frail elders and carers in EU policy on lifelong learning, and as far as the available literature indicates, no Gruntvig-funded project has yet focused exclusively on fourth agers.

It follows that, for lifelong learning to be truly lifelong, learning opportunities should also be provided to occupants of residential and nursing homes. Although the link between learning and good health is a slippery one, older people who continue to engage in cognitively stimulating activities have been found to be in a better position to adopt strategies assisting them to augment their well-being and independence. Residential and nursing homes are to provide arts and crafts centers with paid teaching staff, as well as employ an activity and leisure manager who facilitates or runs clubs, discussion groups, reading societies, social/cultural outings, as well as an in-house magazine. Residents are to be encouraged to engage in life-history projects where they record their past, present, and most important, the future. Interest groups ranging from choirs, horticulture therapy, reflexology, fitness, and sports activities must also be encouraged. Residents are to be empowered to run their own programs through residents' committees, especially as many residents have a wide range of abilities and expertise. Those experiencing confusion and dementia, together with their carers, are to be engaged in reminiscence activities that focus on the personal manner one experiences and remembers events, hence reliving the personal experiences in a way that is vivid and engaging. Through such interpersonal relationships, residents will have opportunities to keep on learning that their personhood is still valued, that they are valued, and that they still have some power over their own lives. EU policy should direct long-term care settings to employ specialists in the creation and facilitation of adult learning environments. This role could be taken by any caring professional who is sponsored to read for a postsecondary or tertiary qualification in adult education.

At the same time, EU policy on late-life learning should not overlook the learning needs and interest of frail elders whose mobility, sight, and/or hearing impairments restrict them from leaving their homes. One possible strategy is to provide adequate transport facilities to and from the learning center. Although this approach is fraught by many logistic and financial obstacles, it becomes more feasible if providers pool their resources and provide disability vehicles that are multi-seated. Buddy programs that pair frail elders with more mobile peers are another possibility. Other possible strategies include enabling homebound elders to participate in learning environments through e-learning strategies, or as practiced by Universities of the Third Age in Britain, having the learning session taking place in learners' homes. It is also important that homebound elders are provided with opportunities to engage in self-directed learning through the availability of informative radio/television programs, mobile libraries, and intergenerational activities such as grandchild-adoption initiatives. The special needs of some elders are also to be given attention. For example, while partially sighted elders require publications to be issued in large print and raised diagrams and would also need screen-magnifying computer screens, it is also necessary that information is presented in Braille tactile codes and speech-recognition computer software. Learning opportunities should also be made available to informal carers where curricula may range from assertiveness, to welfare benefits, to self-protection, to social/cultural outings. Of course, providers must also provide respite care while the learning program is taking place, for which funds may be derived from Grundtvig programs.

## CONCLUSION

Although EU policy on lifelong learning does hold some promise toward more optimum levels of active, successful, and productive aging, it fails to render the fast changing world more hospitable to humans. As Bauman stresses (2005b, p. 126; italics in original), "It is not only the *technical skills* that need to be continually refreshed, not only the *job-focused* education that needs to be lifelong" but "the same is required, and with greater urgency, by education in *citizenship*." While the EU's rationale for older adult learning is characterized by a sense of urgency to keep up with the rapid technological process, no exigency is located "when it comes to catching up with the impetuous stream of political developments and the fast changing rules of the political game" (Bauman, 2005b, p. 126). This lacuna may be overturned if policy makers shift their focus away from formal "economistic" avenues of education to informal "humanistic" contexts of learning, ranging from libraries to social dancing to volunteering, which are popular with older persons. Here, it is noteworthy to

point out Hiemstra's (1976) long-standing finding that the marginalization of subaltern groups in late-life learning relates to non-participation from *education* rather than *learning* per se. Indeed, future EU directives on (older) adult learners would do well to heed his advice that "educators must learn to remove institutional barriers and recognize that self-directed, independent learning is going on—outside of institutional structures" (Hiemstra, 1976, p. 337). Such a policy vision, together with accompanying action plans, has immense potential to construct a more holistic approach to late-life learning, one that is sensitive both to the heterogeneous character of older cohorts as well as the diverse meanings that the act of learning has for different persons.

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