

Curiosity Has No Age

Rewriting What it Means to Grow Older in Malta

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*When we think of discrimination, gender or race usually come to mind first. Ageism – discrimination based on age – is often forgotten. The World Health Organisation's (WHO) Global Report on Ageism (2021) found that half of the world's population holds ageist attitudes towards older adults, including the damaging assumption that they are incompetent or unwilling to learn. At the University of Malta, in collaboration with **Xjenza Malta** and **Esplora Interactive Science Centre**, neuroscientist and dementia researcher **Prof. Charles Scerri** is proving that this is far from the truth.*

The idea for XjenzAnzjan came from a series of observations Prof. Charles Scerri (Department of Pathology) made while watching the news with his 84-year-old mother. 'What is solar energy? What is artificial intelligence?' she would ask. Coming from a large family with limited access to formal education, Scerri's mother had never been equipped with the tools to make sense of the science that makes the daily headlines. Those evening conversations led him to a Eureka moment: his mother was almost certainly not an exception, but one of many older adults struggling to grasp the scientific concepts shaping modern life.

THE MISSING DEMOGRAPHIC

Esplora, Malta's first and only interactive science centre, has become the leading hub of informal scientific education over the past ten years. Whilst not exclusive to the younger demographic, it is widely popular with children, with numbers reaching 300 students a day attending the site. Deputy Director Kiki Mizzi (Esplora) states that the beating heart of Esplora is education. Moreover, she emphasises that it is

Esplora's mission to make education accessible to everyone, irrespective of individual differences such as gender and age.

Hence, when Scerri approached Xjenza Malta and Esplora with the concept, the response was immediate. 'It was a no-brainer,' Mizzi says. The team initially planned five pilot sessions, but the demand was so unexpectedly high that two more sessions were added almost immediately. Those, too, sold out. Now in its second year, the entire XjenzAnzjan calendar is booked through to the end of the year.

The numbers, as Mizzi puts it, 'speak for themselves.' The deeper story is what they reveal: a population whose intellectual hunger has been chronically underestimated.

MORE THAN A LECTURE

A typical XjenzAnzjan session is around two hours long. It is conducted entirely in Maltese and is held at Esplora. The first hour is the information session, after which there is a 15-minute break for participants to converse about what they have learned over a cup of coffee and a small snack. Scerri uses the phrase 'scientific picnic' to highlight the relaxed, informal nature of the XjenzAnzjan ➤



First: Quiz time! Des Zerafa Cini, Head of Content Development, keeps participants on their toes as science meets a little friendly competition.

Second: A warm welcome from Kiki Mizzi, Deputy Director of Esplora, as participants arrive ready to explore, learn, and connect during a XjenzAnzjan session.

Third: Prof. Maria Attard invites participants to explore how our daily habits are shaping the planet—and what we can do about it—in an engaging talk that sparked curiosity, discussion, and fresh perspectives on sustainability.

Fourth: Prof. Charles Scerri arguing why our memories cannot be trusted.

Photos courtesy of Esplora



sessions, which are not only about learning about AI or climate change but also about social communication.

Scerri's first session, titled 'Memorji, dnuviet u kummiedji' was fittingly about the brain, its memories and the curious ways memory can deceive us. Subsequent talks have spanned AI, renewable energy, and climate science, each delivered by a Maltese academic willing to translate their specialism into the language of everyday life. After every talk, the Esplora education team runs a quiz with small prizes for the winning team. The competition, Mizzi notes with a grin, gets fierce.

At its core, XjenzAnzjan is more than a lecture. It is designed to keep participants cognitively and socially engaged. This is not accidental. It is, in a very real sense, a social intervention disguised as a community event.

THE SCIENCE OF STAYING SHARP

According to Scerri, scientific research overwhelmingly debunks the assumption that older adults are incompetent or unwilling to learn. Studies show that the adult brain retains neuroplasticity – the ability of brain cells to grow new connections and adapt. While processing speed may slow with age, older adults are still capable of successfully acquiring complex new skills.

Research also indicates that deficiencies in community knowledge or health literacy are not due to an inability or reluctance to learn, but rather to a lack of tailored, accessible educational pathways. Providing dedicated community learning opportunities will not only satisfy the older population's willingness to learn but also counteract stigma and ageist beliefs.

'From a public health perspective, keeping the mind active is a crucial strategy for maintaining brain health,' Scerri says. 'By directly promoting cognitive stimulation, community programmes like XjenzAnzjan help address modifiable risk



factors for neurodegenerative diseases, thereby aiding national strategic efforts to reduce the long-term clinical and economic impacts of cognitive decline in an ageing population.'

On a day-to-day basis, Scerri's research revolves around what goes wrong in the ageing brain. Decades of research into Alzheimer's disease have produced a concept that sits at the heart of why XjenzAnzjan matters: cognitive reserve.

'Think of it as a savings account for your brain,' he explains. 'Every time you learn a new language, take up a hobby, engage with new ideas, you're making a deposit.' Dementia-related changes can develop in the brain without any presenting symptoms, as post-mortem studies routinely reveal pathological changes in people who, in life, showed none. 'The more one invests in that savings account,' Scerri explains, 'the better the brain can compensate for these dementia-related changes. The brain is a muscle in this respect. The more you train it, the more resilient it becomes against the changes that ageing brings.' XjenzAnzjan is, quite literally, a workout for the brain.

LEARNING IS EMPOWERING

Participants come from strikingly varied backgrounds. 'Some are still living independently and saw an advert on our website. Others arrive in groups from day centres. They sit together over coffee, swap notes, and go home to share what they have learned with the people they live with,' Mizzi explains.

'There's a sense of dignity that comes back,' Mizzi explains. 'When people retire, when they reach a certain age, there's often a feeling that society has stopped expecting anything intellectual from them. XjenzAnzjan restores something that had been taken away – sometimes without anyone realising it had been taken.'

Both Scerri and Mizzi describe the programme as openly anti-ageist. 'We are challenging the idea that when you grow older, you no longer need to learn,' Mizzi says. 'We're using science as a vehicle for social, emotional, and cognitive learning – all at once.'

A NATIONAL QUESTION

In a very real sense, XjenzAnzjan is offering an answer to a much larger question: *what does active ageing in Malta actually mean?*

By Scerri's own assessment, Malta has made significant progress in shifting from a purely care-based model of older age, focused narrowly on welfare and medical needs, toward an *active citizenship* model, built on empowerment and participation. However, he argues that too much of the current offering remains weighted towards leisure activities. Intellectual engagement is still under-prioritised at the community and policy levels.

'Knowledge is power,' Mizzi says. 'Knowing what AI is means you can make informed decisions when you encounter it. Knowing why your blood glucose matters means you can advocate for your own health. This isn't a luxury. It's a necessity for living well at any age.'

XjenzAnzjan began as a quiet response to one woman's questions over the evening news. Two years on, it has become something larger: a small but persuasive piece of evidence that curiosity, unlike people, does not retire. It just waits, quietly, albeit eagerly, for someone to invite it back into the room. 

XjenzAnzjan runs throughout the year at Esplora Interactive Science Centre. Sessions are conducted in Maltese and are free of charge. For information on upcoming talks, contact Esplora directly at info@esplora.org.mt

Further Reading

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