



ZENTRUM FÜR WEITERBILDUNG DER UNIVERSITÄT GRAZ
Center for Continuing Education at the University of Graz

CASE STUDY “Vita activa – Bridging generations through learning (University of the Third Age)”

I. THE UNIVERSITY SETTING: Lifelong Learning at the University of Graz and the Center for Continuing Education

The goal of the University of Graz is to be a partner in lifelong learning for people of all ages interested in (academic) knowledge, learning and education. The Center for Continuing Education at the University of Graz is responsible for the research-based development and testing of innovative programmes and learning settings for open access programmes at university level. Furthermore, the Center is responsible for setting up an information center and counselling service on university continuing education; for developing programmes to further competence and increase professionalism of educators/facilitators working in university continuing education; and for building up and maintaining regional, national and European partnerships for programme development, cooperation projects and networks.

II. THE PROGRAMME: Vita activa; www.uni-graz.at/vita-activa

1. Concept of an innovative programme for a diverse target group

The full Vita activa programme was started in 2009. With Vita activa, the Center is organising new learning opportunities for adults of all age groups, especially older learners who

- are interested in learning about current topics of and latest developments in scientific/academic research,
- are interested in looking at their environment from a scientific/academic perspective,
- are willing to contribute their knowledge and experience to the learning situation,
- want to further their knowledge and put it to use in their day-to-day activities,
- are interested in the University of Graz as a cross-generational learning space.

The programme is based on substantial development work and its encouraging results:

- the project “Development of a Concept for a ‘University of the Third Age’ as well as Testing and Evaluating of Pilot Modules”, supported by the Federal Ministry of Social Security, Generations and Consumer Protection and the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (2005-2007);
- the EU GRUNDTVIG project ADD LIFE – Adding Quality to Life through Inter-generational Learning via Universities, coordinated by the Center for Continuing Education (2006-2008);
- Learning by doing: by taking into account the different and diverse suggestions and requests formulated by attendees of the lecture series Academy on Monday (cf. IMPLEMENT, Case Study of the University of Graz, Academy on Monday), such as more active participation, smaller groups, intensive courses, etc.

2. Content: a variety of themes and formats

The Vita activa programme offers learning opportunities in a variety of formats: lectures, lecture series, workshops, summer universities and semester courses. Examples are lecture series such as “Naturwissenschaft verstehen: Das Beispiel der Chemie” [Understanding the natural sciences: Investigating chemistry], the workshop “Neue Medien: Potenziale und Risiken” [The New Media: Potential and Risks] and the semester course “Einführung in historische Forschungsmethoden für Laien” [A general introduction to historical research methods for laymen]. The three main themes of the Vita activa programme are: Creating knowledge – Transferring knowledge and experience – Creating effective learning.

3. Expected learning outcomes of the programme

The Vita activa programme should provide an opportunity for learners with or without a university education

- to pursue their interest in current topics in humanities, social sciences, science and technology, etc.,
- to research their own questions of interest with experts in the field,
- to use experiences gained from this special cross-generational learning situation in their day to-day activities.

4. Approaches

a. Teaching and Learning

- Moderators and university teaching staff are working together in the preparation, realisation and evaluation.
- The teaching staff consists of university teaching staff only (different age groups), although some workshops are facilitated by experts affiliated with the university.
- The content consists mainly of topics which are already on the university curriculum. If not they must be linked to current research.
- “University Learning” in our learning settings should be critical-reflective, exploratory and self-directed. It should offer the opportunity for participants to make contributions based on their experience and expertise and to reflect in the light of theoretical knowledge. Learning in small groups is therefore also important for this approach.
- Inter-generational learning is actively encouraged in certain learning settings: This should be taken into consideration when defining admission requirements for learning programmes. Inter-generational learning occurs when young and old cooperate “to achieve common goals”. It is “explicitly addressed to the different experiences of the different age groups or generations; [it is] oriented towards the exchange of experience so that use is made of the skills specific to each generation” (cf. Kolland, F., 2008, What is inter-generational learning in a higher education context?, in Waxenegger, A. on behalf of the ADD LIFE project consortium (Ed.) The ADD LIFE European Tool Kit for Developing Inter-generational Learning in Higher Education. Graz.).

b. Research-based development work

- The overall concept is based on expertise from professional literature or studies, practical experience from projects, ongoing discussions with researchers, a research-

based approach to programme development and quality assurance through selection of academic director/s to monitor content and carry out ongoing evaluation. This is also valid for the individual learning units.

5. Some facts & figures (Academic Year 2010/11)

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General information about the programme:

- a series of 14 courses comprised of 23 seminars and workshops, totalling 170 learning units (45 minutes each; not including study groups and project work)
- could be attended as single classes or as a series
- programme structure facilitating continuous and systematic learning
- with a mobile information desk at the Academy on Monday and various learning activities
- 349 attendances; 66,4% of participants are women

Age & Education Profile:*

Highest level of education (%):

| | |
|--|----|
| compulsory education/school leaving certificate and/or apprenticeship: | 18 |
| secondary school certificate: | 26 |
| currently studying at a university or college: | 19 |
| university or college degree: | 37 |

Age (%):

| | |
|--------------|----|
| < 30 years: | 15 |
| 30-39 years: | 21 |
| 40-49 years: | 7 |
| 50-59 years: | 19 |
| 60-70 years: | 33 |
| > 70 years: | 5 |

* Data basis: Evaluation of questionnaires (76% return rate)

III. LEARNING POINTS OF THIS CASE STUDY

1. Experiences in Teaching and Learning (with special focus on inter-generational learning settings)

- a. **University context:** It is important to convey what “university learning” is, what “academic/scientific knowledge” is and how “scientific knowledge” evolves. The expectations of the participants and whether or not they can be fulfilled by the programme must be determined in advance. It is therefore necessary to offer extensive information and guidance to help participants in their choice of programme.
- b. **Tutors:** An exchange of information on the goals of the Vita activa programme and the desired learning setting must take place in advance. The tutors must be provided with a teaching/learning setting where they can convey their expertise as they are working with a group of participants they usually do not work with. Tutors must be ready to ensure that learning can take place based on the heterogeneous character of the group (programme therefore requires more preparation). Due to the variety of formats and themes, there is no typical group profile. Participation in the evaluation and concept is necessary.
- c. **Attracting a multi-generational audience:** Although the programme explicitly takes into account the learning needs of older learners, the Vita activa Programme is able to attract a multi-generational audience because of its

attractiveness as a “general academic education” programme without entrance barriers. This is made clear in the marketing material developed as well as in information and guidance activities in the process of enrolment. The experience shows that it is sometimes difficult to explicitly market “intergenerational learning” in a Higher Education context – especially younger people do not know what to expect. But if younger people – during the course of the programme – have a positive experience they are especially pleased as (positive) contacts to representatives of older generations cannot be taken for granted in our society (due to fewer and fewer children or because in one’s own family and neighbourhood, relationships are more complicated). New social contacts across generations are needed, not only for learning but also to enhance intergenerational solidarity. In general, word-of-mouth recommendation is one of the most effective tools for marketing.

- d. **Tutors** experienced conflicting expectations of participants and participants expected a “competitive” learning situation (Who knows more? Who is the best?).
- e. **The “rules of the game”**: It cannot be taken for granted that general norms for discussions and for cooperation within the group (whether participants are of the same age group or inter-generational) are accepted practice for everyone.
- f. **Tutors** must respect all participants to the same extent (not only the older learners; important to counteract the passiveness of the younger participants, otherwise one generation will dominate; the older learners should not be called upon to be co-tutors and should not be cast in the role of a tutor). (see also: Ludescher / Strempl 2008, Facilitated collaborative design processes with learners – Tutors’ experiences. In: ADD LIFE Tool Kit, 2008)
- g. **Older Learners**: Different points of view of younger participants did lower their esteem in the eyes of the older participants. It is difficult to accept that individuals have irrelevant and unnecessary knowledge at their disposal. It is important for all participants to use “generation-sensitive” language and not to ruin the learning experience with inappropriate remarks. It is important to listen and to make one’s experience and knowledge available to the others – but not to force it on other participants.
- h. **Commitment to other participants and to the educational institution**: The participants must take the requirements of the institution into account, i.e. registering for a course must be seen as a commitment to actually take part in the course.

Learner’s and Tutor’s Voices

“Sometimes it might have been better to pay more attention to the thread – some participants were extremely talkative and wasted quite a lot of time. Key word: discussion, yes; but attention-seekers should be stopped.” (a 35-year-old woman about 2 older participants)

“Learning in mixed-age groups is super because of the surplus of information, knowledge, experience and ideas.” (a 25-year-old male student on the benefits of intergenerational learning)

“The relation with my (much younger) mentee was positive apart from my own tendencies towards ‘paternalism’ and my impatience. Sometimes I want to find quick solutions.” (a 60-year-old-woman on her experience with intergenerational mentoring)

“A mentor is not a ‘job agency’! Set yourself a realistic target! Don’t promise too much. Participants should be aware of the introductory character of the workshop.” (a 70-year-old male tutor on the lessons learned in his workshop)

2. Experiences with research-based development work

- a. Research-based developmental work is not the everyday practice in educational institutions. An active dialogue with researchers needs – at institutional level – to be actively encouraged and put into practice as well as made productive for better programming and educational services. At individual expert level, those members of staff engaged in “reflection” and cooperation with researchers need to have at least some understanding of and competence in research.
- b. Joint publications of researchers and practitioners provide a good opportunity for reflection. Examples are: Waxenegger, A./Kolland, F./Ludescher, M. (2011): „Wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung im Lebenslauf“ (2011). [University Continuing Education across the Lifespan] In: Niedermair, G. (Hrsg.), Aktuelle Trends in der beruflichen Aus- und Weiterbildung. Impulse, Perspektiven und Reflexionen (Schriftenreihe für Berufs- und Betriebspädagogik, Bd. 5), S. 339-353; “Lernen und Bildung im späteren Lebensalter. Leitlinien und Prioritäten 2020” [Learning and Education in Later Life. Guidelines and Priorities] of the Austrian Expert Group on Learning in Later Life (researchers and practitioners) in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection. Graz 2011; Waxenegger, A. on behalf of the ADD LIFE consortium (Ed.) (2008): The ADD LIFE European Tool Kit for Developing Inter-generational Learning in Higher Education, download: <http://add-life.uni-graz.at/>.
- c. Exchange between researchers and practitioners in educational networks such as EUCEN-European University Continuing Education Network (www.eucen.eu) and collaboration in EU projects is also very beneficial.

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