

**Nordplus Adult, mapping project, June 2019 - December 2020 (19 months):
Education of Older Adults: Comparing Baltic and Nordic Frameworks**

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Nordplus survey of lifelong learning possibilities for older people in Denmark ¹

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1 This survey was made in the Nordplus Adult Collaboration project, entitled: "OLDER - Education of Older Adults: Comparing Baltic and Nordic Frameworks, June 2019 – December 2020.

The partnership included the coordinator: The Third Age University (LT); and the partners: Interfolk, Institute for Civil Society (DK), Latvian Adult Education Association (LV), and the Agricultural University of Iceland (IS).

1. Executive statement

The project addresses the issue of possible marginalization of older adults in the access to life-long learning possibilities. However, in this minor national survey of the lifelong learning possibilities in Denmark for older people, we have not found indication of marginalization of older people from being active in lifelong learning opportunities, neither in the member-based associations in the civil society, nor in the private or public non-formal or formal adult education services.

The Third Agers in Denmark are in general not discriminated as learners, so we do not see any need to recommend initiatives that can improve their learning possibilities compared to other age groups. Instead, we see a need for an adjustment of the legislation regarding the general access to lifelong learning in two main areas:

- One in the area of liberal adult education (Evening Schools, Peoples University, etc.), where the overall support has been reduced a lot the last decade and there is a need for a general improvement of the public support for all adult students, including older.
- Another in area of civil society associations, where the legislation only state public support to educational activities for young citizens up to 25 year, while adults and older don't get support; which is a form of age discrimination, and we recommend that the legislation must be extended, so the support becomes equal for all grown up citizens, young, adults and older.

2. Methodology

2.1 Scope of the survey

This minor national survey of the lifelong learning possibilities in Denmark for older people are based on desk research of the overall lifelong learning possibilities for adults, including older people,

- where the main area for informal and non-formal adult learning take place as volunteers and members in the huge number of member-based associations in a civil society context,
- while a lesser part of the non-formal learning takes place in the adult education organisations, such as evening schools, day schools, people's university, folk high schools, etc., and an even lesser part takes place in the formal learning offerings at basic adult education, Gymnasium courses, labour market training, Open University courses, etc.

2.1 Outline of the survey

The survey outlines:

- The overall situation for older people in Denmark, where they live longer, have more money, are more active and engaged as active citizens as ever before.

- The lifelong learning in the Danish civil society that includes both the member-based associations and the liberal adult education institutions.
- The increased importance of older people in the civil society associations, where older people represent a still increasing part of the leaders, members and volunteers.
- The increased importance of older people in the liberal adult education area, where older people represent a still increasing part of the learning providers and learners.
- Concluding recommendations with country-tailored proposals for changes to policymakers and other multipliers.

3. Results

3.1 The new generation 60 plus

A survey made by the Confederation of Danish Industry in 2010 presented the situation for older people in Denmark as the new golden age (Nørr and Dannemand, 2010). In the future, Generation 50+ will become one of the most powerful, veteran, and reworked age groups.

It seems difficult to find a suitable term for this new generation of older people. The politicians, lifestyle experts, the advertising business, the industry, the retail firms and, not least, the media have struggled with this for years. They have tried to come up with names like: Elderly, Seniors, the Grey Gold, Generation Plus, the Free Independents. Some have even used the term 'elder burden', which nobody at their full five does anymore.

For the rapidly growing age group of 60+ in Denmark is far from a burden. On the contrary, they are on their way to not only become the largest and fastest growing population, they are also sitting on more than 70 percent of total personal wealth in the Danish society, and are more than willing to spend their money, according to several studies. (Keissner, 2015)

Likewise, observers of the demographic development in Denmark point out that there has been a tendency to focus on the "weak" elderly, the resource-intensive who need help. And while everyone agrees that they should not be forgotten or neglected, there is a significant group of people in our society who are in a favourable and privileged situation that they revolutionized being young, when they were young, and now they are doing it again - just with their own old age.

The new position of the new generation 60 plus is especially seen in their still more important role as active citizens and volunteers in the Danish civil society sector.

3.2 The tradition of being active in civil society associations

The associations and lifelong learning in the civil society have a long history and strong position in the Danish society. The last three decades of the 19th century is often called the "period of associations" as well as the "the Grundtvigian golden age", because it was during that period that a large number of associations and folk high schools were established throughout the country.

In Denmark, the high legitimacy of the third sector was expressed in 2001, when the government, municipalities and voluntary organizations together presented a Charter for Interaction between the volunteering Denmark / the Association Denmark and the public (Charter, 2013).

The most comprehensive study of the Danish associational life was conducted in 2003 - 2005 by a number of Danish research institutions (Ibsen 2006; Ibsen 2004; Ibsen and Harbermann 2005). The surveys were part of the international comparative research project: The Johns Hopkins Comparative survey of the non-profit sector, which comprises approx. 50 countries.

Data from the big national survey indicated that there are more than 100.000 civil society organisations in Denmark, and in average a Danish citizen is member of 3,5 associations, and nearly all citizens are members of one or more associations. In general, the survey from 2003 - 2005 stated that the civil society had progressed since the 70s and especially the last decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall 1989 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The voluntary engagement:

- In 1993 a quarter of the population did a formal voluntary work (outside their own household and family network), In 2005 it was about one third.
- They were doing it for 17 hours a month on average.
- Number of memberships
- The average number of memberships has grown from 2.9 in 1979 to 3.5 in 1998, and nearly all citizens are members of one or more associations.
- Number of organisations:
- Every fourth of the member-based associations and self-governing institution has been formed within the last 15 years and half of all existing organizations and institutions were formed after 1975.
- The strongest growth in associations, members and activity were in the field of arts, culture, and heritage.

3.3 Older people are still more active as volunteers and leaders in the associations

For some time after the John Hopkin's survey there has been some concern among researchers and the public as to whether Denmark's strong tradition of participation in association life and voluntary work could be maintained.

But the concerns have proven to be groundless. In 2017, the report "Uncertain Modernity" (Henriksen and Levinsen, 2017) could mitigate the expected crisis in the participation in associational activities. The studies have been carried out by 19 researchers from all Danish universities with a faculty of social sciences. The data is based on the latest Danish Value Survey from 2017, that is conducted every nine years and describes the development of Danes' values from 1981 to 2017.

The proportion of Danes, who are members of at least one association has generally increased during the period, and today more than 90 percent of Danes are members of an association. The researchers concluded that voluntary engagement remains a cornerstone of Danish society and that the Danes still use the form of association to promote activities and interests.

The overall tendencies are that the older people are becoming more active in civil society associations, while people of working age fail. At the same time, Association Denmark is more equated today - both in terms of gender and social divide.

In the past, the mainstay of Danish association life was the large group of Danes of working age. The 27-53-year-olds were the group that previously both drew heavy weight in voluntary work and were most active through association memberships, while the younger and older were less active. Today, the trend has changed, and the associations must therefore approach a whole new age composition among both members and volunteers.

The associations must now deal with a new reality in which the elderly are getting still more active in the life of the associations. The group of older people over 72 has thus quadrupled their voluntary involvement since 1990. In total, it is estimated that over the past 18 years alone, approximately 179,600 more elderly volunteers over 65 years have come.

“The elderly have historically good retirement opportunities, good pension schemes, live longer and have better health, and so the group of elderly people is far better educated than they were 30-40 years ago, and we know that the level of education and association participation are linked. So, there are many good explanations that the older spend their resources on volunteering,” says Professor Lars Skov Henriksen.

3.4 An exemplary case - more seniors in sports associations

The above outlined tendencies for older people in the associations has been confirmed by a new survey of tendencies in the sports associations made by Centre for Research in Sport, Health and Civil Society (CISC) at University of Southern Denmark. ²

The survey indicates that older people over 60 now make up a large and sharply increasing proportion of sports associations' coaches and leaders. From 2004 to 2015, the share of coaches and instructors from the age of 60 and up has grown from 4 to 19 per cent. in the sports associations, while the share of managers has increased from 9 to 26 per cent.

The great progress is offset by an equally significant decline in the age group from 20-39 years, with the proportion of younger adult coaches having fallen from 50 to 32 per cent. since 2004, while the proportion of managers has gone from 39 to 24 per cent. Among the other age groups, there are only minor fluctuations.

² Læs mere om projektet [Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe](#) which are part of a major European research project. Læs også [artiklen](#) på CISC's hjemmeside. Læs mere om forskningsprojektet [SIVSCE](#).

Thus, from a relatively small proportion of the volunteers, the elderly has become a significant force in the life of the association. This trend is reflective of an aging population, where the generation 60 plus has more resources than former elder generations.

3.5 Tendencies for older participants in adult education

The latest comprehensive survey of older citizens participation in adult education was published back in 1997 (Udviklingscenter, 1997), where we still had valid statistic reports from the municipalities to base the survey on.

This survey substantiates that almost 20 pct. of the 60-69-year-olds participated in the general public education and competence-giving adult education in a broad sense, i.e. courses provided by evening schools, day schools, folk high schools, peoples university committees and basic formal adult education and gymnasium course providers.

At the courses held by evening schools and liberal adult education providers 55 pct. of the participants were more than 50 years old.

At that time there were no nationwide statistics about the participants at the peoples universities, but we know that 1/3 of the activities of the peoples universities took place in Copenhagen, and here at least 1/3 of all the students were more than 65 years old; and furthermore, more than 2/3 of the participants at the daytime teaching were more than 65 years old. The survey from 1996 also showed that at the competency-giving basic adult education, which corresponds to primary school level, 20 pct. of the students were 50-59 years old and 8 pct. were over 60 years of age in 1995-96. At the gymnasium level, 13 pct. of the students were 50-59 years old, and 8 per cent. were over 60 years old.

3.6 Current trends in adult education

We cannot find reliable data for the changes of the type of students at the different adult education institutions the last two decades since the late 90'ies, mainly because the liberal-conservative Government decided back in 2002 to cancel the previous statistical reports from the municipality to the Ministry of education; but a recent study (Bjerrum and Thøgersen, 2018) shows that the evening school leaders are on average significantly older than the evening school leaders in a similar study in 1998. In 1998 the age average of the leaders was 52 years (Løvgreen & Nordentoft, 1998), but in 2018 it had increased to 63 years.

At the same time, cultural habit studies (Nielsen & Pilgaard, 2014) show that the average age of evening school students has risen by 12 years in the period 1993-2012, and it indicates that the average age of students at the evening schools now is more than 60 years.

So even though the liberal adult education sector has experienced a decrease in public financial support from the municipalities, where the state legislation has been changed from must support to can support, it seems that the older students have an increased participation in most parts of the adult educational activities, both relatively and absolute.

4. Recommendations for third agers

4.1 Differentiate between third age and fourth age

In developed countries, including Denmark the present and future cohorts of older adults can, on average, expect to live longer than previous generations; and for most people, these extra years, in principle, can be characterized by a positive life quality.

However, in this context it may be useful to consider old age as involving not one but more life phases and to ask whether these life phases exhibit different qualities. Proposals have been made, for example, to distinguish between the Third Age and Fourth Age (Baltes & Mayer, 1999)

Laslett, famous for his theory of the Third Age (Laslett 1987), mentions that the Third Age generally is an era after retirement with health, vigour, and positive attitude to being older, except for particular cases. He also described that the Third Age emerged in only developed countries with both population aging and excellent economic conditions.

Yet, in developed countries with the potential gradual aging and longevity, some elders live longer and healthier without any major physical or mental issues, whereas other seniors suffer from immobility, dementia, or other aging-related problems. In gerontology, the former are third agers, and the latter are fourth agers. Laslett also strongly insisted that these four ages did not begin or end at one's birthday or a year having that birthday (Laslett 1991). He argues that persons have their own lifespan; and despite the same age, some seniors are healthy and thus in the Third Age, whereas others are frail and thus in the Fourth Age.

Characteristics of the Third Age are according to Laslett:

- Being mentally and physically healthy.
- Enjoying their life freely (i.e., without obligation to work).
- Living without economic difficulties due to sufficient pension.

However, the older you grow, the more likely you will be to reluctantly lose your mobility and to come under the care from family or others due to age-related diseases, such as cancers, dementia, Alzheimer's, and osteoporosis. Even though you luckily escape these diseases and live long and healthy (i.e., have a long Third Age), you will eventually grow senile and pass away. The final dependence, decrepitude, and death are characteristics of the Fourth Age (Laslett, 1987).

In this report we only consider the lifelong learning possibilities for the Third Agers, and even though such possibilities also can be important for Fourth Agers, the context for such possibilities are very different, and we will not consider them in the following recommendations.

4.2 Recommendations for third agers

As indicate above, the Third Agers in Denmark have a Golden Age and they are in general not discriminated, rather contrary most of them have a favourable and privileged situation, so we do not see any need to recommend initiatives that can improve their life learning possibilities, because they are already better off than most of the other age groups of the population. Instead, we see a need for an adjustment of our legislation for the area of adult education that includes two main parts:

- one for the lifelong learning in the area of adult education (Evening Schools, Peoples University, etc.), where the overall support has been reduced a lot the last decade and there is a need for a general improvement of the public support for all adult students including older.
- Another for lifelong learning in the civil society associations, where the legislation only state public support to education activities for young citizens up to 25 year, while adults and older don't get support; and that is a form of age discrimination, so we recommend that the legislation must be extended, so the support becomes equal for all grown up citizens, young, adults and older.

Overall, we don't see a special need to improve the possibilities for older people to get more offers as students or learners, but rather to motivate the older to be more engaged as leaders members and volunteers in civil society associations, so they can use their experiences and expertise to improve the life conditions for other citizens with more needs for help.

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