

Bundesarbeits-  
gemeinschaft der  
Seniorenorganisationen



bagso

Position Paper

# Enabling education in older age – for everyone

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## Introduction

The eagerness to acquire new knowledge, to learn more and to further one's education is independent of age. After all, education is the key to equal participation and enables us to meet social and individual challenges. In older age, too, education is an asset for the individual and for the society as a whole. Education in older age not only includes the preservation and expansion of knowledge and skills, it also contributes significantly to personal development, well-being and health. It enables people to participate in shaping their environment and can reduce loneliness: Learning together creates a sense of belonging and inclusion. In a rapidly changing world, education is also a prerequisite for having a say and being able to shape one's environment. Those who learn are often also more engaged – and those who are engaged are constantly learning.

Politicians are placing an increasing emphasis on the relevance and necessity of lifelong learning. Up to now, however, it has mainly been defined as learning from childhood until the end of one's working life.<sup>1</sup> This definition should be extended to include learning that continues throughout the decades still awaiting people in their later life. Education is defined here in a broader sense as the effort to comprehend oneself, society

and the world and to act in accordance with this comprehension<sup>2</sup>.

Accordingly, educational activities for older people include not only formal learning in designated educational institutions, but also learning in everyday life, e.g., in the family, among friends, in the context of voluntary engagement, in cultural activities, and also with and from other generations.

In light of the growing number of older people and the profound changes such as digitalisation, climate change and growing social inequality that we are facing as a society, the need is greater than ever.

It is therefore necessary to create framework conditions that enable education for all older people through to old age. What is needed is a comprehensive strategy for the establishment and development of educational structures for the post-professional phase of life that addresses different levels at the same time.

This position paper by BAGSO, the German National Association of Senior Citizens' Organisations, is aimed in particular at those with political responsibility at national, federal state and local level, in order to advocate the cause of education in older age as an important task for society.

<sup>1</sup> Examples include the "National Continuing Education Strategy", the "National Education Panel", the "National Report on Education" and the target groups addressed by the Department of Lifelong Learning at the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Deutscher Ausschuss für das Erziehungs- und Bildungswesen (*German Committee for Education and Training*) (ed.) (1960): Gutachten zur Situation und Aufgabe der Deutschen Erwachsenenbildung (*Report on the situation and task of German adult education*). Stuttgart, Klett, p. 404

BAGSO appeals to policymakers to ensure that the right to education, as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations, also applies to older persons. BAGSO welcomes the announcement of the coalition agreement concluded in 2021 between the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Alliance 90/The Greens and the Liberals (FDP) intending to promote senior-centred approaches at all levels and, in particular, educational and meeting opportunities for older persons. Senior citizens' organisations, educational and cultural institutions, clubs and associations, churches as well as science and research are ready to partner – but above all the many older people themselves who wish to help shape the future with their acquired knowledge, their views and skills and to in turn share their expertise.

### **1. Anchoring education in older age as a political task**

In a society of long life, education in older age is of particular importance and must be recognised as a political task and promoted at all levels of government. This calls upon the federal states (the "Länder") – responsible for education and culture – and the national government as the guardian of equal living conditions as well as the municipalities as providers of services of general interest.

The federal states are in charge of education policy, which also includes adult education. Meanwhile, almost all federal states have enacted adult education laws. They are now urgently required to provide adequate financial support for adult education, including educational opportunities for older people. The total share of adult education in the general education budget of the federal states currently amounts to less than one percent on average.<sup>3</sup> The topic of education in older age should also be firmly anchored in the federal state ministries responsible for educational matters as well as in the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder.

The municipalities have a crucial role to play in promoting engagement, education and participation in the context of senior citizens' work (cf. Art. 71 (2) German Social Security Code, SGB XII). They must be reliably endowed with the necessary financial resources to be able to fulfil these tasks. The Federal Government's Seventh Report on Older People already demanded that local senior citizen's organisations receive the necessary legal and financial support to carry out this task. This also includes activities in the field of education in older age.

The federal government has already contributed considerable financial resources and provided impetus for educational tasks in the field of school education and vocational training. It is, for instance, committed to

<sup>3</sup> Jaich, R. (2015): Finanzierung der gesetzlich geregelten Erwachsenenbildung durch die Bundesländer (*Financing of statutory adult education by the federal states*), DIE aktuell. Available (in German) at: [www.die-bonn.de/doks/2015-finanzierung-01.pdf](http://www.die-bonn.de/doks/2015-finanzierung-01.pdf)

the National Continuing Education Strategy, the Digital Pact for Schools and the National Education Platform. The federal government is called upon to assume responsibility in a similar way for general adult education and for education in older age. The first necessary step would be to clearly assign the issue to either the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) or the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ).

## 2. Developing and implementing a National Education Strategy

To ensure educational equality and equal participation opportunities in later life, a national strategy for education in older age is required. Older people themselves should be involved in the development of such a strategy, for instance through the participation of senior citizens' organisations and representatives. The insights of educational science and geragogy, which research educational processes in the second half of life, should form the basis. The practical experience of people working in adult education, social work with seniors and the health and care professions should also be incorporated. The strategy for education in older age should be regularly updated and developed.

The guiding ideas of such a National Education Strategy should be:

- Education in older age aims at self-development and social participation and not at commercially exploitable skills and abilities of older persons.

- Education in older age is basically voluntary and serves the personal enrichment of life, satisfaction and joy.
- Education in older age must take into account all older people in their diversity and provide access for them.
- Education in older age needs conditions that promote learning, encourage older and very old people to discover their own life and learning potentials as well as promote their participation and self-organisation.
- Education in older age must take into account ethical and social issues as well as processes of societal change and their impact.

Following these guiding ideas, the substantive tasks of a strategy for education in older age are elaborated in more detail below.

## 3. Creating educational opportunities everywhere and for all

The current educational landscape for older people does not stretch evenly across the country. The largest gaps are in the north and east of Germany, and there is also an urban-rural divide. In addition, there are older people who are not reached by the existing educational offers. To reduce the inequality of educational opportunities in older age, educational offers that do justice to the diversity of older people must be created throughout Germany.

Educational opportunities for older people have to be provided in every municipality in continuous coordination and cooperation with the federal states. What is needed

are easily accessible, neighbourhood-based learning spaces and offers in the direct living environment of older people, which must be adequately equipped financially, spatially and technically. The offers must be free of charge or inexpensive to enable even older people on low incomes to participate in educational activities. If necessary, learning opportunities should also be implemented in people's own homes and in care facilities. One such outreach educational offer is the so-called "Senior Internet Helpers"<sup>4</sup> who explain the handling of a PC or tablet to people in their home or in a residential facility. Educational institutions that are already active should be encouraged and enabled to expand their activities to include education for life in older age and to address all groups conceptually.

For rural areas, it is even more important to ensure that education providers cooperate across municipalities and that education and participation also take place in unusual places (the local pub instead of the adult education centre). In addition, transport services and outreach offers should be available to persons with limited mobility and social networks and self-organisation be promoted. Digital education offers older people, too, the chance to learn from any location. However, this requires more offers to promote digital skills and the expansion of digital infrastructure.

Another central goal should be the provision of services for older people in all their diversity. Special attention should be given

to the groups of people who have not been reached by previous offers. This is especially true for people with little formal education, with precarious old-age protection, the old and very old and for migrant seniors. People with health impairments, disabilities and care needs must also be provided with easily accessible educational opportunities. Here, the focus should be on their resources and abilities, and framework conditions need to be created to facilitate their access.

Learning opportunities for older people should be based on the everyday life of the heterogeneous groups, both in terms of learning locations as well as content and learning formats. Older people should be directly involved in the planning and design of educational, engagement and leisure time opportunities, and self-organisation should be encouraged.

Municipalities should be empowered to create local or regional education networks that embrace the topic of education in older age. Existing education networks or education offices should, if they have not already done so, include the target group of older people in their work and network the local stakeholders of education in later life. These include adult education centres, denominational educational institutions, universities of the third age, self-organised initiatives of older people, multi-generation houses, senior citizens' offices, church congregations, sports and meeting places, migrant self-organisations, libraries, museums, theatres, and opera houses. Regional education

<sup>4</sup> This refers to volunteers who assist interested older people in using technical devices and digital media.

networks could use their expertise in providing educational, engagement and thus participation opportunities to identify gaps and avoid redundant structures.

#### 4. Promoting thematic diversity

Educational interests and needs are as diverse as age itself and should therefore also be reflected accordingly in the educational and promotional landscape. These include cultural education, foreign languages, law and consumer protection, sense orientation and spirituality, training within and for voluntary work, training for professional activities, caregiving tasks and many more. Some topics appear to be particularly relevant from a socio-political point of view:

Technical and media skills are another important key to social participation for older people. The Eighth Government Report on Older People made this just as clear as the digitalisation surge in many areas of life due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Digital skills are also a prerequisite to make use of the growing number of digital educational opportunities. Therefore, it must be a central task of education policy to enable the currently eight million offliners aged 60 and over<sup>5</sup> and the millions of other older beginners

to learn digital skills. This requires local touchpoints in all municipalities where older people receive qualified learning support as they experience the Internet, the promotion of Internet access in all forms of housing for older people and the digital skills of professionals in all occupational groups relevant to older people.<sup>6</sup> The BMFSFJ has therefore launched the “Digital Pact for Older People” in collaboration with BAGSO.<sup>7</sup> This initiative must become an integral part of a digitalisation offensive of the new federal government.

In old age, too, health literacy is a key prerequisite for prevention. People with a high degree of health literacy take a more health-promoting approach and navigate the healthcare system more competently. Yet health literacy is particularly low among older people.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, it must be a common goal of education and healthcare policy to offer health-related information in a way that is easy to understand and tailored to the target group, and to include it in education and participation schemes for older people.

The field of basic education should likewise be geared towards older learners. In Germany, an estimated 20 per cent of persons

5 Based on data from the D21 Digital Index (2020/21), p.12, and the Federal Statistical Office (2021): 14th Coordinated Population Projection

6 Cf. BAGSO statement on the Government Report on Older People on the topic of “Older people and digitalisation”, 2020: <https://www.bagso.de/publikationen/stellungnahme/older-people-and-digitalisation/>

7 More information available (in German) at: [www.digitalpakt-alter.de](http://www.digitalpakt-alter.de)

8 Schaeffer, D. et al. (2021): Gesundheitskompetenz der Bevölkerung in Deutschland vor und während der Corona-Pandemie (*Health literacy in the German population before and during the Covid-19 pandemic*). Bielefeld, University of Bielefeld. Available online (in German) at: [https://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/download/2950305/2950403/HLS-GER%202\\_Ergebnisbericht.pdf](https://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/download/2950305/2950403/HLS-GER%202_Ergebnisbericht.pdf)

aged 65 and over are functionally illiterate.<sup>9</sup> Written language skills are a basic prerequisite for social participation and can still be acquired even in old age. The same applies to numeracy. Migrants who, for various reasons, only wish to start learning German in old age should be able to find language courses that focus on their learning needs.

For social cohesion and the promotion of democracy, the political education of older people is also of great importance. Older persons already constitute the largest group of voters. Political education imparts information literacy and protects against misinformation, strengthens participation and the assumption of responsibility in neighbourhoods and communities.

In view of the major social transformation processes such as globalisation, climate change and pandemics that affect all generations, a wider focus should be placed on promoting intergenerational education formats.

To address this diversity of interests, older people should be involved in the design of educational programmes. Educational institutions should incorporate advisory boards

consisting of representatives of diverse social groups, including older people, in their programme design. This should be a prerequisite for the allocation of public funds.

## 5. Collecting data on the educational behaviour of older people

In Germany, we know little about the participation in education, the educational needs and the educational aspirations of older people. They are neither adequately covered by education studies<sup>10</sup> nor by age studies<sup>11</sup>. We do know, however, that participation in formal education decreases when people leave the world of work. Even in old age, participation in education is highly correlated with the level of education.<sup>12</sup> That is why traditional offers of organised education tend to reach higher educated, healthy, younger seniors, but not the majority of older people. Inequalities in education thus become more pronounced in old age.

Within the framework of a National Education Strategy, the educational behaviour of older people in Germany should be examined in a differentiated and regular manner in a separate study. On this basis, the Na-

<sup>9</sup> According to the LEO study (2018), the rate for 18- to 64-year-olds is 12.1%. It is estimated to be higher for older people due to schooling in/after World War II.

<sup>10</sup> Educational studies on adults in Germany with age cut-off in the 6th decade of life: National Education Report, Adult Education Survey (AES), Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC); education studies focusing on continuing vocational education: National Education Panel (NEPS), National Continuing Education Strategy.

<sup>11</sup> Age surveys including a few questions on education: German Ageing Survey (DEAS), Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE)

<sup>12</sup> Evidenced, among others, in the studies SHARE, AES, "Continuing Education Behavior and Interests of Older Persons" (EdAge) and in Competencies in Later Life (CiLL)



tional Education Report can be expanded to include people over the age of 65.

A study on education in older age should not only cover formal educational settings, however, but also non-formal and informal educational activities, including the wide range of topics and the diverse learning contexts. The role of residential institutions, for instance, as well as the areas of e-learning, learning in family and intergenerational contexts should also be considered. Socio-cultural data are also crucial, as they provide information on social and educational inequalities. The educational interests and needs of people who have not been reached so far by services should also be taken into account.

Regular surveys on participation in education allow for the ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of a national strategy for education in older age.

## **6. Promoting the transfer of good practices**

The field of organised education in and for later life is much less professionally structured than other areas of education. In order to promote the transfer of good practice, a scientific survey and evaluation of existing learning formats are needed. This should be based on quality criteria for successful education in older age<sup>13</sup> and the principles of geragogy, developed in cooperation with

older people. This evaluation should be part of a detailed educational study. The aim, however, is not to standardise educational programmes, but to improve their quality.

After good practice has been identified, the task is to transfer this knowledge on a broad scale. To this end, it is necessary to develop cross-institutional networking and the exchange of stakeholders in educational work with older people. A national competence centre for education in older age is proposed for this task. It could share knowledge about the best possible design of learning-friendly conditions in and for old age, establish networks and ensure exchange between science and practice. It would be a central hub for local stakeholders and education providers seeking to establish or further develop services for older people.

The transfer of good practice on a broad scale should also be the aim of comprehensive funding guidelines. These must be directed towards the establishment of sustainable structures for education in older age. Projects that have proven to be successful should be consolidated and expanded.



<sup>13</sup> Köster, D.; Schramek, R. & Dorn, S. (2008): Qualitätsziele moderner SeniorInnenarbeit und Altersbildung. Das Handbuch (*Quality objectives in modern senior citizen's work und education in older age. The handbook*). Oberhausen, Athena-Verlag

## 7. Strengthening geragogy and qualifying teachers

The majority of the teachers – or rather: learning facilitators – of education in older age are older volunteers, freelancers and much less often full-time professionals. They enrich the educational offer with their diverse professional backgrounds. Until now, however, there have only been a few continuing education schemes to train them for their task in educational work with older people. In order to improve the quality of old-age education, it is therefore urgently necessary to strengthen the professional field of geragogy and to qualify, advise and support learning facilitators.

As a key prerequisite for this, geragogy needs to be anchored as a scientific discipline at universities and colleges. Geragogical teaching content is occasionally included in the study of gerontology, social work or educational sciences. Since 2018, a part-time Master's programme in Geragogy has been offered at the Karlsruhe University of Education. However, there is a need for development with regard to own chairs and study programmes. In addition to the necessary research on the topic, teaching would also provide more qualified professionals who would be able to develop and implement high-quality offers.

The topic of education in older age must also be incorporated into all training and study programmes relevant to work with

older persons, for instance also in the area of health and care. Professionals who are already working in the field should be able to receive in-service training.

Volunteer learning facilitators should have the opportunity to acquire the necessary didactic skills. In addition, the conditions for their involvement in education should be improved: through the integration into reliable structures and a cooperation with full-time staff on an equal footing, through preparatory courses and compensation for expenses.<sup>14</sup>

## 8. Providing better information about educational offers

Older people's access to education and participation can also be improved by providing low-threshold information about offers and making it easier to find them. Given the variety of potential providers, there is a need for better overview options that pool the existing offers.

At the local level, the education networks that are to be created have the task of making existing education offers known to the public, for example by including them in the municipal information for older people.

At the national level, this goal is being pursued with the BMFSFJ-funded online portal "wissensdurstig.de" (*Hungry for Knowledge*). Here, the offers of several adult education centres, multi-generation

<sup>14</sup> Cf. BAGSO position paper (in German) on "Engagement and education in old age", 2017: <https://www.bagso.de/publikationen/positionspapier/engagement-und-bildung-im-alter/>

houses, smaller education providers and volunteers are already incorporated. Users can view local offers on the topics they are interested in. A service telephone provides information for older people who do not use the Internet. Maintenance and expansion of the portal will remain an important task in the future as well. The National Education Platform planned by the BMBF should also integrate digital education offers for older people in the future.

The concept of “lifelong learning” must be understood and realised as learning across the entire life course. This requires the cooperation of politics, administration, science and civil society within the framework of a National Education Strategy. Education is a human right and must therefore be provided to all people, irrespective of their age.

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## **BAGSO – The voice of older people**

BAGSO, the German National Association of Senior Citizens' Organisations, represents the interests of older generations in Germany. It stands up for active, healthy and self-determined ageing in social security. BAGSO is an umbrella organisation of more than 120 civil society organisations that are run by or work for older people.

In a colourful and diverse society, BAGSO promotes a differentiated image of old age. This includes both the various opportunities arising from longer lives as well as times of vulnerability and the need for care.

BAGSO calls on politicians, society and businesses to offer conditions that allow for a good and dignified life in older age – in Germany, Europe and worldwide.

At the United Nations, BAGSO is actively involved in the development of a UN Convention for Older People. BAGSO is also a member of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP), an international alliance of over 200 civil society organisations that advocates for the rights of older people. BAGSO's Secretariat for International Policy on Ageing provides information on current international developments in ageing policy and contributes the interests of civil society to international processes.