Heritage in Action
Policies and Practices Addressing the Life Planning of Older Adults

“The steadily growing segment of older people is still predominantly considered as a problem to be solved, and it is rarely recognised that it represents an enormous cultural-intellectual and economic treasure. In fact, this group opens up a great variety of unprecedented opportunities concerning new ways of education, communication and intergenerational relations, but also, and in particular in terms of economics, considering the needs and benefits of age-related research, production and commercialisation of products and services.”

(Urdaneta & Jarré 2015, p. 3)

1 lifeplanningnetwork.org
Abstract

Concepts such as lifelong learning, life-wide learning and skills for the 21st century were received by heritage institutions with great enthusiasm 10-15 years ago. Archives, museums and other heritage institutions saw the chance to advocate for the organisational potential in learning through heritage in a learning society.

By the end of the first decade of the 21st century the financial and economic crisis took its firm grip on all policy areas, and it became ever clearer that policies on learning as competence development were only addressing issues in regard to employability in order to be able to address issues related to the need for basic skills development and the postponing of retirement age for older adults.

In doing so the largest growing group in our European population (retired older adults) were left outside policy development. Older adults were forgotten by mainstream politics at the same time as the societal challenges for this specific group were addressed as a social problem in other European settings regarding issues related to healthy and active ageing.

This paper will try to outline some of the reactions from different European heritage institutions which operate on a regional and local level. These are examples that might influence policy development in the coming years.

Lifelong learning policies and practices

A general optimism was seen in society in many different ways at the turn of the millennium. The cold war was over, and for most people a concept like “global war on terrorism” was still to come. Most people believed things were going in the right direction. Progress was perhaps a little slow, and there were a few obstacles, but all in all a sense of optimism prevailed. In the social sciences and the humanities there were political initiatives in which academic thinking which was already a generation old suddenly became politically interesting. One of the areas in which this took place was lifelong learning.

In the early 1970s one of the politically expanding areas was lifelong learning, which had roots in UNESCO’s agenda for lifelong education. At the turn of the millennium UNESCO inspired the new policy design, but only after further development where the OECD in particular was a central player (Bengtsson 2009). The EU document entitled “Making a European Area for Lifelong Learning a Reality” (European Commission 2001) injected a sense of optimism and belief in the learning potential for society of museums, for instance. As researchers stressed the social aspect of participation in lifelong learning, the majority of museums in Europe felt a call to
make a change in their own expectations (Ekholm & Härd 2000). In Europe, the direction of this optimism in museums was most strongly influenced and expressed at the time by a handful of colleagues. They were not least seen in Tony Blair’s UK, where a good example was David Anderson’s prophecy about the role of museums in what he called “the age of learning” (Anderson 1999).

Throughout Europe many museums felt invited to develop more learning programmes and to expand their potential, and as a result the relevant EU programmes for arts and culture suddenly received a great number of applications concerned with learning aspects and social dimensions. At the same time, the programmes in the EU dedicated to education and learning began to receive applications in which the participants in proposed projects were museums. This was a new situation and illustrated the turn towards education and learning in museums and their strong belief in their own potential to facilitate these two areas of concern.

Around 2008 and 2009 the focus on education and learning was at its peak, and when the first evaluations of lifelong learning policies were published in 2007, they coincided with the first expressions from the EU about how the Commission would prioritise and develop European cultural policies (European Commission 2007). In terms of the expectations of arts and culture, there was a cohesive and socially responsible dimension which was balanced with an economic growth perspective.

At the same time, the evaluations of the European lifelong learning policies were written with an emphasis on both the OECD’s expansive economic agenda and on UNESCO’s responsible humanistic approach to lifelong learning as a learning society (Jarvis 2007). When the UK Labour government was given a forecast of what would be needed for lifelong learning to become a reality in 2009, the report had a clear vision that lifelong learning meant from cradle to grave, in accordance with the UNESCO approach to lifelong learning and not just as an approach to lifelong learning in accordance with the OECD agenda on competence development as ‘employability’ in advanced capitalism and as the driving force of globalisation (Jarvis 2007, p. 195).

In this political context, older adults were defined as people who had retired either completely or to a certain degree from their working lives, and special attention was devoted to the terminology used about the third and fourth age (Laslett 1989). The

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2 Laslett presents four major phases or ages: in the first age of life, we focus on early socialisation, in which a person is heavily dependent on others, usually parents; the second age is one of adult maturity, in which individuals typically take on increased responsibilities for social relationships, career development, perhaps childrearing and financial autonomy. In the third age, Laslett refers to renewed opportunities available to adults who are free from the constraints of the second age: this is a time for exercising greater freedom and creativity, which was sometimes suppressed in ‘the peak’ of life when duties and obligations to work took
divide between the third and fourth age was also proven functional in the perspective on capacity building in later life (Schuller & Watson 2009; Fristrup & Grut 2015), because of the demarcation of old age as a time for losses, deficits, and risks and the renewed emphasis on the potential for positive contributions by older people and the ageing population in society and the economy (Klimczuk 2015, p. 17). Many different sectors in society would be expected to play an important role in the (lifelong) learning society in the future, with museums being highlighted in the context of policymaking in the EU.

With regard to this European emphasis, museums in Northern Europe (Sraml 2012) in particular began to build up their efforts in relation to various initiatives concerning people’s social development and learning potentials throughout the entire life course. However, this was soon to change completely!

When the recession set in towards the end of the first decade of the century, it took a firm grip on all policy areas – making it extremely clear that policies regarding capacity building (i.e. competence development) only addressed lifelong learning in terms of working life, which followed the OECD approach to lifelong learning (Jarvis 2007). After having introduced the term “key competences” in 2005/2006, the focus was narrowed considerably to “basic skills” – meaning the skills needed to find and keep a job (Jarvis 2007).

Following the political strategy about key competences for life, one of the largest and fastest growing groups in our population was left out from EU lifelong learning policy because older adults were defined as people who had left the labour market. Older adults were excluded from mainstream lifelong learning policies and included in health and social policies at the same time as the challenges for this specific group were elaborated as a social problem that needed to be addressed within the contemporary framework of active ageing policies (Majdecka et al. 2015).

At the same time, museums in many European countries were already engaged in developing activities for and with older adults, drawing on the lifelong learning agenda in line with UNESCO’s approach, and in a surprisingly large number of cases this kind of development had been going on for some time – so the museums were simply continuing their efforts almost regardless of the political change around them. One of the ‘best practices’ in this area is the work with reminiscence and volunteering (Fristrup & Grut 2015). According to Fristrup and Grut (2015), there seems to be a split between the two activities, with reminiscence work being oriented.

precedence. In the final and fourth age, a person prepares for death and may once again be dependent as in the first age.
towards the fourth agers and volunteering work being the domain of the third agers according to Laslett’s approach (Laslett 1989).

In both areas of reminiscence and volunteering, a lot has happened in the last couple of years; but at the same time it seems difficult for the museums to get evidence-based documentation of their efforts and potential to emphasise a lifelong learning agenda for older adults (Zipsane 2011a). If this tendency is not controlled, it may indeed be counterproductive to policy aims of sustainability, innovation and cross-sectorial solutions (Fristrup 2012).

**Life planning for older adults**

In 2012 the European Association of Regional and Local Authorities on Lifelong Learning (EARLALL) set up a working group on lifelong learning and the ageing population. During 2012-2013 a number of regions in Europe arranged seminars where participants from local and regional authorities, universities and civic society discussed the following with regard to what we called *life planning for older adults*:

**Who** are the local and regional stakeholders, **how** do they work and **what** do they offer in the cases mentioned below:

1. Physical and mental health and well-being of older adults
2. Competence preservation and development of older adults
3. Social life and community participation of older adults
4. Social and financial security and independence of older adults
5. Use and transference of individual and social life experiences of older adults.

The participating regions were:
Rhineland-Pfalz (Germany)
Baden-Württemberg (Germany)
Provincia di Livorno (Italy)
Durham County (UK)
Jämtland-Härjedalen (Sweden)

The seminars produced notes and in some cases even more formal minutes. The overall impression was that there is a great similarity between the regions and their connection to their use of the welfare society as a role model. The differences are primarily visible in relation to what are considered private/personal and public/collective responsibilities and resources. The dominating structure seems to be that there are public stakeholders who take responsibility for the social and financial
security and independence of older adults. These public stakeholders are only complemented by private stakeholders to a small extent – for instance with regard to the health and well-being, competence preservation and social life and community participation of older adults. The differences between the regions are mostly concerned with the level of ambition in the services offered to older adults, which also reflects differences in family or household patterns and traditions.

At this point we will reflect upon two observations in the material from the regional studies. First of all it looks as if only heritage institutions like museums and possibly archives and local heritage associations take responsibility for or show interest in the use and transference of the individual and social experiences of older adults. As mentioned in Provincia di Livorno and in Rhineland-Pfalz, there may be private employers who include older adults as part of their staff policy. However, this may often be just as much for financial reasons as for reasons of competence. In Durham County and in Provincia di Livorno they also mention the intergenerational use of older adults in compulsory school education. Older adults may act as grandfather/grandmother figures in the classroom or in the schoolyard, where their visible maturity has a calming effect on the children and contributes to their sense of feeling secure and safe during school.

All in all, the regional studies point to efforts made in the context of heritage institutions, and their exclusive way of making room for the development of the individual’s experiences in museum visits throughout their entire life course. The ways in which museums play a key role in these efforts generally involve voluntary activities of all kinds and different kinds of memory-based activities such as reminiscence work. In a broad sense, both the volunteering work and the reminiscence work involve the use of history in their approach to the development of older adult life competences.

The activities in museums where volunteering plays a central role seem to vary in the European regions owing to different traditions for volunteering, and there seems to be a tendency in favour of volunteering being much more strongly rooted as a complement to working life in some countries such as the UK and Italy. In countries such as Germany and Sweden volunteering is much more regulated by law and agreements on the labour market, and there are limits to what volunteering can be and cannot be. But when volunteering is a part of museum activities, there is clearly a tendency in the UK, for example, to focus on the special memory-based competences of the volunteers (i.e. older adults’ life competences), which may be a result of a their former working life or education (Hansen 2012).
The reminiscence work taking place in museums has so far developed two main methods, one of which is predominantly from art museums and was originally developed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York for people with dementia symptoms (Fristrup & Grut 2015). Basically, the participants experience works of art and express in speech or otherwise what they see, and whatever a participant sees is treated as a construction of the truth. The other method, which has spread among open-air museums in Europe in recent years, involves working to stimulate the memories of people suffering from dementia regarding their lived experiences of childhood and youth by using full-scale, three-dimensional reconstructed environments from ordinary life 30-50 years back in time (Grut 2013; Fristrup & Grut 2015).

It is of course positive that during the first decade of the 21st century museums have been determined to play a role in wider societal matters and have taken up a variety of initiatives including initiatives for older adults. There is, however, also a risk that organisations like museums, which are structured to operate based on long-term results, become dysfunctional when their initiatives – even those which have positive outcomes – are disrupted because of political and economic turmoil.

Secondly, it appears that none of the regional and local authorities, universities or civic society representatives participating in the discussions sees any connection between the use or transference of the life competences of older adults and their well-being, competence preservation or social life participation.

Maybe this is the core of the problem regarding the attitudes of stakeholders towards older adults. The interdependency between health, competence preservation and for example social life participation and the respect experienced for the individual which comes from addressing older adult life competences, is not highlighted in either research or policies. The difficulties in cross-sectorial thinking – out of the box thinking, if you like – is unfortunately stimulated by the same structures in contemporary society which also guarantee transparency, accountability and control (Zipsane 2011b).

We are in a situation at the beginning of the 21st century, which is comparable to the situation a century ago. Not only has the museum sector felt and experienced the same kind of ‘optimism’ in the 1990s about the potential of a lifelong and life-wide thinking. The museum sector is in the process of experiencing the same kind of alienation of its potential for stimulating well-being and life quality for older adults.
as psychoanalysis (for instance) experienced as a science in the first half of the 20th century.

**Responsible older adults**

According to the latest work on best practices with regard to evidence-based policy-making and policy recommendations on active and healthy ageing from SIforAGE (Majdecka et al. 2015, p. 45):

“The SIforAGE project recommends to the Health, Education and Social Affairs Departments to put in place educational programmes to make society conscious of each person's responsibility to care and protect in a life-course approach. It should also be widely disseminated that each person is responsible for taking care of his/her life and health, with enough resources to live without impairments as much as possible.”

SIforAGE emphasises the societal investment aspect with regard to older adults, as “it is essential to continue investing in people throughout their lives, especially in terms of continued training and development for older people, mentoring programmes and knowledge partnerships set up to exchange and share learning and experiences” (Majdecka et al. 2015, p. 45).

It is our conviction that the contemporary downplay of the potential of heritage institutions in general and museums in particular will be costly not only for ageing societies, but also with regard to the older adults who will not be given their rightful chance to improve their quality of life as their life experiences and competences are not recognised and not perceived as an investment in the European ageing societies.

In order to shape the active, autonomous and responsible older adult in accordance with the neo-liberal political rationality (Rudman 2006), we need social arenas where the life experiences of older adults can unfold and facilitate the life planning of older adults and their practices of self-caring in later life (Fristrup & Grut 2015). The neo-liberal political rationality is linked to the political agenda on active ageing. Walker and Maltby (2012, p. 6) point out that:

“Despite the presence in the EU, for nearly a decade, of the conceptualisation of active ageing based on participation and well-being across the life course, the actual policy instruments still focus primarily on employment, as we have seen.”

This brings us back to the lack of political initiatives with regard to the recognition of older adults’ life experiences and their need for life planning after their working lives. Walker (2002; Walker & Maltby 2012) emphasises the importance of a broad
perspective on active ageing, which doesn’t exclude older adults whose working lives are over. According to Boudiny (2012, p. 1088):

“This can be accomplished by searching for new ways to remain engaged. For the young-old, fostering adaptability may help those who feel forced into retirement (e.g. due to health problems or mandatory retirement) cope with this transition. From this perspective, policy could focus on optimising the role of pre- and post-retirement counselling programmes in increasing interest in non-work-related activities and helping retirees to rearrange their personal goals such that they can be fulfilled in a non-work context. For this purpose, programmes should be comprehensive in nature.”

The challenges in ageing European societies are to incorporate the comprehensive nature of political efforts in policy making with regard to the practices of museums, for instance, with a view to incorporating broader lifestyle issues and addressing individual participant needs, as multiple factors influence older adult’s experience of life.

This paper ends by quoting Boudiny (2012, p. 1088), because his words reflect a new and necessary policy framework, which can illustrate the potential of heritage in action as a tool for the life planning of older adults:

“Policy may support this re-focusing process by acknowledging these alternative ways of ageing actively and educating older people about their potential benefits. It also offers concrete opportunities for institutional settings.”
References


