

## UNIVERSITIES OF THE THIRD AGE AND THIRD AGE EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT:** *Over the past fifty years, Universities of the Third Age have grown into a worldwide phenomenon, offering educational experiences to millions of older learners across radically different cultural and institutional landscapes. Born in Toulouse in 1973 under Pierre Vellas's direction, the French model linked these programs directly to universities. Britain's 1980s reimagining created a peer-led alternative that spread through Anglophone nations. Today we see hybrid forms emerging worldwide, each shaped by local welfare traditions, higher education structures, and civic capacity. My analysis draws on international research to show how the competing vision of university affiliation versus community autonomy - produces distinct outcomes in access, sustainability, and pedagogy. While evidence consistently links participation to cognitive vitality, social integration, and wellbeing, major gaps remain digital divides exclude many, socioeconomic barriers persist, and policy support lags demographic need.*

**Keywords:** *Universities of the Third Age; lifelong learning; older adult education, active aging; educational gerontology.*

### 1. Introduction

Demographic aging forces us to rethink education's temporal boundaries. No longer can we treat learning as youth's province, ending when careers begin (Formosa, 2019). Given the rising life expectancy in developed and developing nations alike, modern societies face the imperative of actively supporting intellectual engagement and sustained social participation during the extended post-retirement years (Casanova et al., 2023). The Universities of the Third Age (U3A) arose specifically as a response to this societal shift, delivering dedicated learning experiences for individuals over fifty—those transitioning into what the scholar Laslett (1989) famously designated as life's distinct "third age". Laslett's conceptual framework firmly repudiates pervasive decline narratives. Rather than depicting later life as an inevitable path toward deterioration, Laslett (1989) championed its recognition as a crucial developmental stage—a period liberated from the constraints of career and childrearing, rendering it ripe for profound intellectual growth, creative expression, and meaningful civic contribution. This powerful reconceptualization directly counters the deficit models that historically informed gerontology, placing emphasis instead on the capabilities and enduring potential of older adults (Rynkowska, 2020)

Third Age Universities embody this affirmative vision. Their programs intentionally prioritize intrinsic intellectual stimulation and critical social connection over instrumental goals like credentials or job training (Formosa, 2019). This focus sets them apart distinctly from traditional higher education and from remedial adult programs. While the concept originated in France, it has achieved global diffusion, successfully adapting to wildly diverse contexts—including Nordic welfare states, market-oriented Anglophone societies, East Asian developmental states, and Latin American democracies (Casanova et al., 2023). Crucially, each local adaptation reflects specific regional conditions while preserving the core commitment to providing accessible, meaningful learning experiences for senior citizens.

The first Université du Troisième Âge was founded by Pierre Vellas in Toulouse in 1973, a program deliberately embedded within the existing university structure (Formosa, 2014). This strategic decision stemmed from a foundational philosophy: academic institutions carry a social responsibility to serve all citizens across the entire lifespan, extending beyond the conventional focus on career-preparing youth. By strategically utilizing existing academic infrastructure, such as lecture halls, libraries, and faculty expertise, Vellas managed to forge formal

connections between older learners and contemporary scholarship (Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000). This "French model" rapidly disseminated across continental Europe and Francophone regions throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The universities supplied crucial elements like facilities, administrative backing, and instructors, framing third age education as integral to higher education's democratic mandate (Casanova et al., 2023). While this institutional affiliation conferred significant legitimacy, it inherently fostered dependencies on the priorities and resources of the host universities. Britain's 1981 Cambridge model, developed by Peter Laslett and Michael Young, broke decisively with the French approach (Swindell & Vassella, 1997). Rather than university-based programs, they envisioned autonomous learning cooperatives where older adults themselves organized classes, taught one another, and governed collectively. Members paid modest fees to cover costs but received no formal instruction from university faculty (Formosa, 2014).

self-help philosophy emphasized mutual aid over institutional authority. It assumed older adults possessed sufficient expertise to teach peers, that learning itself mattered more than credentials, and that democratic governance would sustain engagement (Swindell & Vassella, 1997). The model spread rapidly through UK, Australia, and New Zealand, thriving particularly where strong civic traditions and educated middle classes existed.

As Third Age Universities spread worldwide, hybrid forms emerged. Poland blends university connections with member participation (Rynkowska, 2020). Spain combines both models, with university-linked programs in some regions and autonomous groups elsewhere (Casanova et al., 2023). Brazil integrates health promotion into university-based programs, reflecting public health priorities (Veras & Caldas, 2004).

Asian adaptations reveal both opportunities and tensions in cross-cultural transfer. South Korea's Senior Universities operate through welfare organizations, emphasizing structured activities and practical skills alongside education (Jun & Evans, 2014). Hong Kong's Elder Academy combines government support with community organization (Wong, 2013). Thai scholars debate whether Western concepts fit Buddhist cultural values and local understandings of elder roles (Ratana-Ubol & Richards, 2016).

## 2. Organizational models and philosophical foundations

### *The university-linked model*

The university-linked model that originated in France and spread across continental Europe and Francophone regions embodies a particular philosophy regarding the relationship between higher education institutions and their surrounding communities, the nature of educational provision for older adults, and the appropriate sources of legitimacy and expertise in third age learning (Formosa, 2014, 2019a). This approach conceives of Universities of the Third Age as extensions of the university's educational mission rather than as separate or autonomous entities, thereby positioning them within established academic structures and drawing on institutional resources, facilities, and personnel (Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000). The philosophical underpinnings emphasize the university's social responsibility to serve citizens across the entire life course, the value of maintaining connections between older learners and current scholarly knowledge, and the legitimacy that derives from association with respected academic institutions (Formosa, 2019).

In organizational terms, university-linked U3As typically operate as programs or departments within traditional universities, with administrative oversight provided by university staff and governance integrated into existing institutional structures (Formosa, 2014). This arrangement provides access to lecture halls, libraries, laboratories, and other campus facilities that would be prohibitively expensive for independent organizations to maintain, while also enabling participants to benefit from the intellectual and cultural atmosphere of the university environment (Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000). Faculty members, both active and retired, commonly serve as instructors, bringing their disciplinary expertise and teaching experience to bear on course design and delivery (Formosa, 2014). The curriculum often reflects academic disciplines and may follow structured sequences, though without the formal assessment, grading, or credentialing that characterizes degree programs (Formosa, 2019). This academic orientation distinguishes university-linked U3As from more informal learning circles or social clubs, positioning them as serious educational endeavors that maintain intellectual rigor while

accommodating the needs and interests of older learners (Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000).

The funding and resource model of university-linked U3As typically involves some combination of institutional support, public subsidies, and participant fees, with the balance varying across countries and institutions depending on higher education funding systems and policy priorities (Formosa, 2014). In some contexts, universities allocate budget lines specifically for third age programs, recognizing them as part of the institution's community engagement and lifelong learning responsibilities (Formosa, 2019). Public authorities may deliver targeted funding for older adult education as part of active aging policies or lifelong learning strategies (Vasilenko, 2023). Participants generally pay fees that are substantially lower than the full cost of provision, with the differential representing an implicit or explicit subsidy that reflects the social value attributed to maintaining educational opportunities throughout later life (Formosa, 2014). This funding model provides greater stability and resources than purely volunteer-driven approaches can typically achieve, though it also creates dependencies on institutional priorities and public budgets that may shift with changing political and economic circumstances (Vasilenko, 2023).

The pedagogical approach within university-linked models tends toward more formal, structured instruction that draws on traditional academic methods including lectures, seminars, and guided discussions (Formosa, 2014). While recognizing the particular characteristics of older learners and adapting teaching methods accordingly, instructors typically maintain an expert-to-learner orientation in which faculty possess specialized knowledge that they transmit to participants through organized presentations and explanations (Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000). This approach reflects assumptions about the value of academic expertise and the benefits of exposing older adults to current scholarly thinking across disciplines ranging from sciences and social sciences to humanities and arts (Formosa, 2019). Critics have noted that this more hierarchical pedagogical relationship may not fully leverage the substantial knowledge, skills, and life experience that older learners bring to educational settings, potentially underutilizing the potential for peer learning and mutual education that

characterizes alternative models (Formosa, 2009). Defenders argue that many older adults specifically seek access to academic knowledge and appreciate the opportunity to learn from recognized experts in fields beyond their own professional backgrounds (Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000).

### *The self-help volunteer model*

The self-help model pioneered in Britain and subsequently adopted in Australia, New Zealand, and other Anglophone contexts embodies radically different assumptions about the organization, governance, and pedagogy of third age education (Formosa, 2014; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). This approach positions Universities of the Third Age as autonomous, member-led organizations that operate independently of universities or other established institutions, relying instead on volunteer labor, democratic governance, and mutual aid principles (Laslett, 1989). The philosophical foundations emphasize the capabilities and agency of older adults, the value of peer learning and reciprocal teaching relationships, and the importance of organizational autonomy and self-determination (Formosa, 2014). Rather than conceiving of participants as recipients of services provided by professionals or institutions, the self-help model treats them as active citizens who collectively create and manage their own learning communities (Swindell & Vassella, 1997).

Organizationally, self-help U3As function as voluntary associations governed democratically by their members through elected committees and regular general meetings (Formosa, 2014). All organizational roles, from overall coordination to course facilitation to administrative tasks, are performed by volunteers drawn from the membership, creating a distributed leadership model in which many members contribute to the collective enterprise according to their interests, capabilities, and available time (Swindell & Vassella, 1997). This volunteer basis enables extremely low operating costs, with membership fees typically covering only basic expenses such as meeting room rentals, administrative supplies, and occasional guest speaker honoraria (Findsen, 2019). The absence of paid staff and reliance on donated labor makes the model highly scalable and accessible, though it also creates potential vulnerabilities regarding organizational capacity,

continuity, and the uneven distribution of volunteer burden across the membership (Formosa, 2009).

The pedagogical philosophy of self-help U3As centers on peer learning and mutual education, recognizing that older adults possess diverse knowledge, skills, and expertise accumulated through decades of professional work, hobbies, travel, reading, and life experience (Formosa, 2014; Knowles, 1980). Rather than importing external experts or relying on credentialed instructors, the model encourages members to share their particular areas of knowledge and interest with fellow members, creating a rich curriculum that emerges organically from the collective capabilities and curiosities of the group (Swindell & Vassella, 1997). Course offerings might range from foreign languages taught by former teachers or expatriates to local history presented by longtime residents, to art appreciation led by retired museum professionals, to current affairs discussions facilitated by former journalists or policy analysts, to music appreciation guided by amateur musicians, to walking tours conducted by enthusiastic hikers (Findsen, 2019). This peer teaching approach creates reciprocal relationships in which individuals serve as both teachers and learners across different subjects, fostering a sense of mutual respect and shared enterprise rather than hierarchical expert-novice dynamics (Formosa, 2014).

The self-help model's emphasis on democratic participation and collective ownership extends beyond governance to shape the entire culture and ethos of these organizations (Formosa, 2014). Members typically refer to themselves as participants or learners rather than students, and to facilitators or coordinators rather than teachers, linguistic choices that reflect the egalitarian philosophy and the rejection of hierarchical relationships associated with formal schooling (Swindell & Vassella, 1997). Decision-making processes emphasize consultation, consensus-building, and broad participation rather than top-down authority, though this can sometimes lead to lengthy discussions and difficulty reaching decisions when members hold divergent views (Formosa, 2009). The volunteer nature of the enterprise means that organizational capacity and program offerings depend heavily on member engagement and the availability of individuals willing to take on coordinating roles,

creating potential fragility when key volunteers experience health problems, family obligations, or burnout from sustained organizational responsibilities (Formosa, 2009; Martín García & Requejo Osorio, 2005).

### *Hybrid and national variations*

The binary distinction between university-linked and self-help models, while analytically useful for understanding foundational philosophical differences, inadequately captures the rich diversity of organizational forms that have emerged as the U3A concept has been adapted across different national contexts and institutional environments (Casanova et al., 2023). Many countries have developed hybrid approaches that combine elements of both models, seeking to capture benefits of institutional affiliation and professional support while maintaining grassroots participation and community ownership (Formosa, 2019). These hybrid forms reflect pragmatic problem-solving and institutional bricolage as practitioners navigate local constraints and opportunities, drawing on available resources and adapting to cultural expectations regarding appropriate relationships between citizens, educational institutions, and the state (Casanova et al., 2023).

In some European contexts, U3A programs maintain formal partnerships with universities that provide facilities, occasional instructors, and administrative support while preserving substantial autonomy in governance and program development (Formosa, 2014). Portuguese examples illustrate how municipalities, universities, and civil society organizations can collaborate to create programs that benefit from multiple sources of support and legitimacy without being fully controlled by any single partner (Jacob, 2012; Veloso, 2017). These arrangements require ongoing negotiation and relationship management to balance potentially competing interests and expectations, but they can offer greater stability and resource access than purely volunteer models while avoiding some of the bureaucratic constraints and institutional conservatism that may characterize fully integrated university programs (Veloso, 2017). Polish Universities of the Third Age similarly blend academic programming with volunteer leadership and community engagement, creating distinctive institutions that serve both educational

and social functions within a society that places high value on both formal learning and community solidarity (Halicki, 2013; Kobylarek, 2013).

The South Korean Senior University model represents a fundamentally different adaptation that reflects distinctive welfare traditions, cultural values, and organizational landscapes (Jun & Evans, 2014). These programs typically operate under the auspices of welfare organizations, religious institutions, or community centers rather than either universities or autonomous volunteer groups, with paid staff providing coordination and instruction alongside volunteer contributions (Jun & Evans, 2014). The emphasis tends toward practical skills, health and wellness activities, and structured social programs rather than the academic content or peer-led seminars characteristic of Western models, reflecting different cultural constructions of appropriate elder roles and different expectations regarding the purposes of programs serving older adults (Jun & Evans, 2014). Korean programs often serve welfare functions alongside educational ones, providing meals, health screenings, and social services as well as classes and activities, thereby addressing the multiple needs of older adults within a more holistic framework than programs focused exclusively on intellectual enrichment (Jun & Evans, 2014).

Brazilian adaptations have created distinctive links between university extension programs and public health initiatives, positioning U3A programs within broader strategies for active aging and preventive gerontology (Nascimento & Giannouli, 2019; Rynkowska, 2020; Veras & Caldas, 2004). This integration reflects both the extension mission of Brazilian universities, which emphasizes community engagement and service, and public health priorities regarding the prevention of chronic disease and disability among aging populations (Nascimento & Giannouli, 2019). Programs typically combine intellectual and cultural activities with physical exercise, health education, and wellness promotion, creating comprehensive offerings that address multiple dimensions of healthy aging simultaneously (Veras & Caldas, 2004). The involvement of health professionals, including faculty and students from medicine, nursing, and allied health programs, creates opportunities for intergenerational learning and for connecting older adults with health resources and information

(Nascimento & Giannouli, 2019). This model demonstrates how third age education can be strategically positioned within public health and active aging frameworks, potentially expanding its appeal to policymakers and funders who might not prioritize purely educational initiatives (Rynkowska, 2020).

Italian adaptations have developed what scholars describe as dynamic, flexible, and accessible models that blend university connections with community engagement and participant voice (Principi & Lamura, 2019). Research on Italian U3As documents their evolution from primarily university-based programs toward more diversified organizational forms that maintain academic connections while expanding community partnerships and participant involvement in governance and programming (Principi & Lamura, 2019). The Italian case illustrates ongoing processes of organizational learning and adaptation as programs respond to changing participant demographics, evolving policy contexts, and shifting societal expectations regarding older adult roles and capabilities (Principi & Lamura, 2019).

### **3. Educational philosophies and pedagogical approaches**

#### *Andragogy and adult learning principles*

The theoretical foundations of third age education draw heavily on adult learning theory and the concept of andragogy, which distinguishes the education of adults from the pedagogy appropriate for children and adolescents (Formosa, 2019; Knowles, 1980). Malcolm Knowles and other adult education theorists have articulated principles that emphasize the distinctive characteristics, needs, and capabilities of adult learners, arguing that effective adult education must recognize and respond to these differences rather than simply applying pedagogical approaches developed for younger students (Knowles, 1980). These principles have relevance for older adult learners who bring decades of accumulated experience, well-developed self-concepts, and intrinsic motivation to educational settings, creating both opportunities and requirements for pedagogical approaches that differ substantially from conventional schooling (Formosa, 2019; Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000).

Central to andragogical theory is the principle of self-direction, which recognizes that adults, and particularly older adults who have successfully navigated long careers and complex life circumstances, possess both the capability and the desire to exercise substantial control over their own learning (Knowles, 1980). Rather than depending on teachers to determine what should be learned, in what sequence, and through what methods, self-directed learners identify their own learning needs and goals, seek out appropriate resources and opportunities, and evaluate their own progress according to personally meaningful criteria (Knowles, 1980). This principle aligns well with the U3A context, where participants typically choose to attend without external compulsion, select from among available offerings according to their interests, and pursue learning for intrinsic satisfaction rather than external credentials or career advancement (Formosa, 2014). The self-help U3A model particularly embodies self-direction by positioning members as collective designers of their own educational programs, though university-linked models also accommodate self-direction through flexible, non-compulsory participation and choice among diverse course offerings (Formosa, 2019).

The principle that experience serves as a rich resource for learning recognizes that older adults bring vast reservoirs of knowledge, skills, and understanding accumulated through professional work, family responsibilities, community involvement, travel, hobbies, and decades of living through historical events and social changes (Knowles, 1980; Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000). This accumulated experience represents both a learning resource that can be drawn upon to make sense of new information and a teaching resource that can be shared with others through storytelling, demonstration, and discussion (Formosa, 2014). Andragogical approaches seek to activate and leverage this experiential knowledge rather than treating learners as blank slates to be filled with expert-determined content, creating educational processes that build on what people already know and that value the wisdom derived from lived experience (Knowles, 1980). In U3A contexts, this principal manifests through peer teaching, where members share their areas of expertise, and through pedagogical methods that emphasize discussion, reflection, and the connection of new learning to personal experience rather than passive reception of information

isolated from context (Formosa, 2014; Swindell & Vassella, 1997).

Adult learning theory also emphasizes that adults tend to be problem-centered or life-centered in their learning orientation rather than subject-centered, meaning they are most motivated to learn when they perceive clear connections between educational content and their current life situations, interests, or concerns (Knowles, 1980). Older adults may seek learning opportunities to understand health conditions they or family members face, to develop skills for new hobbies or volunteer roles, to make sense of contemporary social and political developments, to explore cultural traditions or historical periods that interest them, or to engage with philosophical and existential questions that assume greater salience in later life (Formosa, 2019; Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000). Effective third age education responds to these varied motivations by offering diverse content that connects to participants lived realities and perceived needs rather than imposing externally determined curricula organized around academic disciplines or professional requirements (Formosa, 2014). The flexibility and responsiveness characteristics of many U3A programs, particularly self-help models where course offerings emerge from member interests and capabilities, embodies this problem-centered orientation (Swindell & Vassella, 1997).

#### *Peer learning and mutual education*

Beyond general adult learning principles, U3A programs, particularly those following the British self-help model, have developed distinctive pedagogical practices centered on peer learning and mutual education (Formosa, 2014; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). These approaches recognize that educational relationships need not be unidirectional flows from expert teachers to novice learners but can instead be reciprocal exchanges among people who possess different forms of knowledge and who take turns serving as resources for one another's learning (Formosa, 2014). This pedagogical philosophy challenges conventional assumptions about credentialing, expertise, and the authority to teach, asserting instead that the knowledge and skills accumulated through life experience gives legitimate foundations for educational facilitation even in the absence of formal teaching qualifications or

academic credentials in the subject matter (Laslett, 1989; Swindell & Vassella, 1997).

Peer learning in U3A contexts takes multiple forms, from relatively structured courses where a member with particular expertise leads a series of sessions on a defined topic, to discussion groups where participants share knowledge and perspectives on subjects of mutual interest without a designated expert, to study circles where members collectively investigate a topic through reading, research, and collaborative sense-making (Findsen, 2019; Formosa, 2014). These varied formats share an underlying assumption that valuable learning occurs through horizontal exchange among peers rather than requiring vertical transmission from credentialed authorities to subordinate students (Formosa, 2014). The peer learning approach tends to create more relaxed, conversational atmospheres than conventional classroom instruction, with less emphasis on performance, evaluation, and demonstration of mastery and greater emphasis on exploration, questioning, and the sharing of partial understandings and diverse perspectives (Swindell & Vassella, 1997).

The mutual education principle extends beyond individual courses to characterize the overall ethos of self-help U3A organizations, where members contribute according to their capabilities and interests while benefiting from the contributions of others, creating networks of reciprocal teaching and learning relationships (Formosa, 2014; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). An individual might facilitate a course on Italian language based on years of study and travel in Italy, participate as a learner in a course on local history led by a longtime resident, and join a discussion group on current affairs where no one claims expert status, but all contribute their knowledge and perspectives (Findsen, 2019). This pattern of rotating between teaching and learning roles across different domains creates a more egalitarian social dynamic than context where some individuals consistently occupy expert positions while others remain perpetual novices, fostering mutual respect and recognition of the diverse capabilities distributed across the membership (Formosa, 2014).

Critics have raised questions about the quality and accuracy of peer teaching, noting that enthusiasm and life experience do not necessarily translate into pedagogical skill or ensure that information shared is current, accurate, or

appropriately contextualized (Formosa, 2009; Martín García & Requejo Osorio, 2005). Without the quality assurance mechanisms provided by credentialing systems and institutional oversight, peer-led courses may vary substantially in quality, with some facilitators proving engaging and knowledgeable while others struggle to organize content effectively or inadvertently convey misconceptions (Formosa, 2009). Defenders of peer learning respond that the informal, non-credentialed nature of U3A participation means that stakes are lower than in formal education, with participants free to attend or not based on their assessment of value received, and that the diversity of offerings means that individual variations in quality matter less than in contexts where students have limited choices (Formosa, 2014). They also note that peer facilitators often bring passion, accessibility, and practical relevance that may be missing from more academic instruction, and that the process of preparing to teach others can itself be a powerful learning experience for facilitators (Swindell & Vassella, 1997).

#### *Liberal education and learning for its own sake*

A distinguishing characteristic of Universities of the Third Age across different organizational models is their embrace of liberal education philosophy and learning for its own sake rather than for instrumental purposes such as career advancement, credentialing, or economic return (Formosa, 2014, 2019a). This orientation reflects both the life stage of participants, who have typically completed their primary careers and no longer seek education primarily for vocational preparation, and philosophical commitments to education as a dimension of human flourishing and democratic citizenship rather than merely as human capital investment (Laslett, 1989; Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000). The liberal education emphasis positions U3A programs in contrast to both vocational adult education, which focuses on work-related skills and credentials, and remedial education, which addresses basic literacy and numeracy deficits, instead creating spaces for intellectual exploration, cultural enrichment, and the pursuit of knowledge and understanding as intrinsically valuable activities (Formosa, 2019).

The liberal arts tradition that informs U3A programming emphasizes breadth of learning

across diverse domains of human knowledge and culture rather than narrow specialization or technical training (Formosa, 2014; Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000). Typical U3A offerings span humanities subjects including literature, philosophy, history, and languages; arts including music, visual arts, theater, and creative writing; sciences including astronomy, biology, environmental studies, and health sciences; and social sciences including psychology, sociology, economics, and political science (Findsen, 2019; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). This breadth reflects an assumption that educated people should possess some familiarity with multiple domains of human understanding and that later life provides opportunities to explore subjects that earlier life circumstances may have precluded (Formosa, 2019). The non-credentialed nature of U3A participation liberates learners from concerns about grades, prerequisites, or demonstration of mastery, enabling exploration of subjects simply because they interest or intrigue rather than because they serve practical purposes or lead to recognized qualifications (Formosa, 2014).

The emphasis on learning for its own sake connects to broader philosophical questions about the purposes and meanings of education and about what constitutes a life well-lived (Laslett, 1989; Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000). Liberal education traditions, extending back to classical antiquity, have argued that engagement with ideas, cultivation of aesthetic sensibilities, development of critical thinking capabilities, and understanding of the natural and social worlds contribute to human flourishing independently of any practical applications or economic returns (Formosa, 2019). From this perspective, the opportunity to read great literature, contemplate philosophical questions, appreciate musical compositions, understand scientific discoveries, or study historical periods represents a form of human development and self-actualization that has intrinsic value regardless of whether it produces measurable outcomes in other domains (Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000). Third age education embodies this philosophy by creating contexts where older adults can pursue intellectual and cultural interests without needing to justify them in instrumental terms (Formosa, 2014).

The liberal education orientation also carries civic and democratic dimensions, reflecting arguments that informed, thoughtful citizenship requires broad knowledge and critical thinking

capabilities that enable individuals to understand complex social issues, evaluate competing claims and arguments, and participate meaningfully in democratic deliberation (Formosa, 2019; Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez, 2000). U3A programs that offer courses on current affairs, political systems, economic issues, environmental challenges, or social problems contribute to civic education by helping older adults understand the contexts within which they live and make decisions as citizens (Formosa, 2014). The discussion and deliberation that characterize many U3A sessions provide practice in listening to diverse perspectives, articulating and defending positions, and engaging respectfully with disagreement, all skills essential to democratic participation (Findsen, 2019). From this perspective, third age education serves not only individual development but also collective goods by fostering an informed, engaged citizenry capable of contributing to democratic governance and civil society (Formosa, 2019).

#### *Active aging and preventive gerontology frameworks*

Increasingly, Universities of the Third Age have been framed within the World Health Organization's active aging paradigm and related concepts from preventive gerontology, positioning educational participation as a strategy for promoting health, wellbeing, and continued engagement throughout later life (Formosa, 2019; Rynkowska, 2020). The active aging framework defines optimal aging as a process of maximizing opportunities for health, participation, and security to enhance quality of life as people age, emphasizing that aging well requires more than absence of disease and instead depends on maintaining physical, mental, and social functioning and on continuing to participate meaningfully in family, community, and society (WHO, 2002). From this perspective, educational programs for older adults represent interventions that can contribute to multiple dimensions of active aging simultaneously by supplying intellectual stimulation, social connection, physical activity, sense of purpose, and civic engagement (Formosa, 2019; Rynkowska, 2020).

The cognitive engagement provided by educational participation aligns with theories of cognitive reserve and brain plasticity, which suggest that intellectually stimulating activities



throughout the life course may help maintain cognitive function and potentially delay or reduce risk of cognitive decline and dementia (Gaia, da Silva, da Silva, Vasconcelos, & Gonçalves, 2024; Stern, 2002). While definitive causal evidence remains elusive and the mechanisms are not fully understood, accumulating research suggests that mentally challenging activities, social engagement, and continued learning may contribute to building and maintaining neural connections and cognitive capabilities (Gaia et al., 2024). From a preventive gerontology perspective, U3A participation represents a form of cognitive exercise that may complement physical exercise and health behaviors in promoting healthy aging, though scholars emphasize the need for more rigorous longitudinal and experimental research to establish causal relationships and identify which aspects of educational participation contribute most to cognitive outcomes (Gaia et al., 2024; Rynkowska, 2020).

The social dimensions of active aging receive particular emphasis in U3A contexts, as these programs provide structured opportunities for social interaction, relationship formation, and community belonging that can help combat the social isolation and loneliness that represent significant health risks for older adults (Formosa, 2019; Rynkowska, 2020; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). Retirement, widowhood, relocation, and declining health among peers can all contribute to shrinking social networks and reduced social engagement during later life, with well-documented negative consequences for both mental and physical health (Gaia et al., 2024). U3A participation creates regular social contact, opportunities to form new friendships based on shared interests, and a sense of belonging to a community of peers, potentially offsetting losses in other social domains (Findsen, 2019; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). The social capital generated through these networks extends benefits beyond individual friendships to create collective resources, shared norms, and mutual support systems that benefit both individuals and communities (Swindell & Vassella, 1997).

Preventive gerontology framing has strategic implications for positioning U3A programs within policy frameworks and funding streams, as it enables advocates to argue that educational programs represent cost-effective public health and social welfare interventions rather than

merely cultural amenities or individual consumption goods (Rynkowska, 2020; Vasilenko, 2023). If educational participation contributes to maintaining health, independence, and social engagement, thereby potentially reducing healthcare costs, delaying institutionalization, and preventing social isolation, then public investment in third age education can be justified on grounds of both individual wellbeing and collective benefit (Rynkowska, 2020; Vasilenko, 2023). This framing has gained traction in policy discussions in various countries, though it also raises questions about whether instrumentalizing education through health and prevention rationales risks undermining intrinsic values and liberal education commitments that have historically characterized the U3A movement (Formosa, 2009, 2014).

#### 4. Evidence on outcomes and benefits

##### *Cognitive and mental health dimensions*

The relationship between educational participation in later life and cognitive and mental health outcomes has attracted considerable research attention, driven by both theoretical interest in mechanisms of cognitive aging and practical concerns about rising dementia prevalence in aging societies (Gaia et al., 2024; Stern, 2002). While methodological challenges limit the strength of causal inferences that can be drawn from available evidence, accumulated research across multiple countries and contexts suggests consistent positive associations between U3A participation and various indicators of cognitive engagement and mental wellbeing, though the magnitude and mechanisms of these relationships remain subjects of ongoing investigation and debate (Gaia et al., 2024; Vilaplana Prieto, 2010).

Studies examining cognitive outcomes have documented that U3A participants report sustained intellectual challenge and cognitive stimulation through their educational activities, with qualitative accounts emphasizing the mental engagement provided by learning new information, grappling with complex ideas, and participating in discussions that require active thinking rather than passive consumption of entertainment (Formosa, 2014; Vilaplana Prieto, 2010). Quantitative research has found

associations between educational participation and measures of cognitive function, though establishing causal direction proves difficult given that individuals who choose to participate in educational programs may differ systematically from non-participants in baseline cognitive status, health, and other characteristics that independently influence cognitive trajectories (Gaia et al., 2024). The cognitive reserve hypothesis provides a theoretical framework for understanding potential mechanisms, suggesting that intellectually stimulating activities throughout the life course may build neural connections and cognitive capabilities that afford resilience against age-related changes and pathology, though direct evidence for this mechanism in late-life educational participation remains limited (Stern, 2002).

Mental health and wellbeing outcomes have received extensive attention in U3A research, with remarkably consistent findings in different settings indicating positive associations between participation and various indicators of psychological health (Gaia et al., 2024; Vilaplana Prieto, 2010; Wong, 2013). Participants commonly report improved mood, greater life satisfaction, enhanced sense of purpose and meaning, and reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety compared to their pre-participation status or compared to non-participating peers (Gaia et al., 2024; Vilaplana Prieto, 2010). These associations appear robust across different U3A models, countries, and participant characteristics, though again the correlational nature of most research limits causal interpretation (Gaia et al., 2024). Potential mechanisms linking educational participation to mental health include the cognitive stimulation and sense of accomplishment derived from learning, the social connections and support provided through group participation, the structure and purpose provided by regular activities, and the positive identity and self-concept associated with being a learner and community member rather than a passive or dependent older person (Formosa, 2014; Wong, 2013).

Vilaplana Prieto's (2010) doctoral research examining the relationship between university programs for older adults, satisfaction during retirement, and quality of life in Spain found significant positive associations between program participation and multiple wellbeing indicators. Her analysis documented that participants

reported higher life satisfaction, better psychological adjustment to retirement, and enhanced quality of life across physical, psychological, social, and environmental domains compared to non-participants (Vilaplana Prieto, 2010). While acknowledging the limitations of cross-sectional data and the possibility of selection effects, Vilaplana Prieto (2010) argues that the consistency and magnitude of observed associations, combined with participants' own attributions of wellbeing improvements to their educational engagement, provide reasonable confidence that participation contributes meaningfully to psychological health and life satisfaction during the retirement transition.

Longitudinal research that follows participants over time provides somewhat stronger evidence for causal relationships than cross-sectional comparisons, though self-selection into participation remains a confounding factor that challenges interpretation (Gaia et al., 2024). Studies tracking participants before and after joining U3A programs have documented improvements in wellbeing and life satisfaction measures, suggesting that participation contributes to positive changes rather than simply reflecting pre-existing differences between joiners and non-joiners (Gaia et al., 2024). However, the absence of randomized controlled trials, which would deliver the strongest causal evidence, reflects both practical and ethical challenges in experimental manipulation of educational opportunities (Gaia et al., 2024). Scholars have called for more sophisticated quasi-experimental designs, longer-term follow-up studies, and research that examine potential mechanisms and moderating factors to strengthen the evidence base and move beyond simple documentation of associations toward understanding of causal pathways and boundary conditions (Gaia et al., 2024; Rynkowska, 2020).

### *Social connection and community integration*

Perhaps the most consistently documented and robust benefit associated with U3A participation concerns social connection and community integration, with research in different settings converging on findings that educational programs provide valuable opportunities for relationship formation, social network expansion, and sense of community belonging (Findsen, 2019; Formosa, 2014; Gaia et al., 2024; Swindell & Vassella,

1997; Wong, 2013). These social dimensions appear particularly salient for participants themselves, who frequently cite social connection as a primary motivation for joining and continuing participation, sometimes rating it as equally or more important than the intellectual content of courses and activities (Findsen, 2019; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). The social benefits of U3A participation take on special significance given well-documented health risks associated with social isolation and loneliness among older adults and given life course transitions such as retirement, relocation, and bereavement that can shrink social networks during later life (Gaia et al., 2024; Rynkowska, 2020).

U3A programs create structured contexts for regular social interaction with peers who share interests and who are navigating similar life stages, providing natural bases for relationship formation that may be lacking in other domains of older adults' lives (Formosa, 2014; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). Unlike social contact with family members, which may involve caregiving obligations or generational differences, or casual encounters in commercial settings, which remain superficial and transient, U3A participation brings together individuals with shared intellectual curiosities and offers repeated contact over time that enables friendships to develop (Findsen, 2019; Formosa, 2014). Participants describe forming new friendships, expanding their social circles, and developing a sense of belonging to a community of learners, with some reporting that U3A relationships have become central to their social lives and primary sources of companionship and support (Swindell & Vassella, 1997; Wong, 2013).

The social networks formed through U3A participation appear to provide both instrumental and emotional support, with members exchanging practical assistance, sharing information and resources, and offering emotional understanding and encouragement during difficult periods (Findsen, 2019; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). Research has documented that U3A social networks can serve protective functions, with participants monitoring one another's wellbeing, noticing absences that might indicate health problems or other difficulties, and mobilizing informal support when members experience illness, bereavement, or other challenges (Formosa, 2014; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). This support functions emerge organically from

relationships formed through shared learning activities rather than being formally organized as mutual aid systems, representing a form of social capital that benefits both individuals and communities (Swindell & Vassella, 1997). The reciprocal nature of these relationships, in which individuals both provide and receive support over time, maintains dignity and mutuality rather than creating dependency or charity dynamics (Formosa, 2014).

Quantitative research has attempted to measure the social value generated by U3A networks, with Swindell and Vassella's (1997) landmark Australian study giving the most comprehensive economic analysis available. Their survey of 24,870 Australian U3A members across 126 groups documented extensive volunteer contributions, with members collectively donating hundreds of thousands of hours annually to teaching, organizing, and administrative work (Swindell & Vassella, 1997). When calculated at replacement wage rates, these volunteer contributions represented an estimated economic value exceeding four million US dollars annually for the Australian and New Zealand U3A movements combined, a substantial but typically invisible contribution to social welfare and community capacity (Swindell & Vassella, 1997). Beyond this quantifiable economic value, the social capital generated through U3A networks contributes to community cohesion, civic engagement, and the quality of social life in ways that resist precise measurement but that represent important collective goods (Swindell & Vassella, 1997). Participants often extend their U3A involvements into other forms of volunteering and community participation, with some research suggesting that educational engagement serves as a gateway to broader civic involvement and social contribution (Findsen, 2019; Formosa, 2014).

### *Health, wellbeing, and quality of life*

While Universities of the Third Age are primarily educational rather than health interventions, research has documented various health and wellbeing benefits associated with participation, though the mechanisms and causal pathways linking educational engagement to health outcomes remain incompletely understood (Gaia et al., 2024; Nascimento & Giannouli, 2019; Rynkowska, 2020; Vilaplana Prieto, 2010). Participants consistently report subjective

improvements in health and wellbeing, describing themselves as feeling healthier, more energetic, and more vital since joining U3A programs, though objective health measures show less consistent associations (Gaia et al., 2024; Vilaplana Prieto, 2010). The relationship between educational participation and health likely operates through multiple pathways, including the physical activity involved in attending sessions, the cognitive and social engagement that may influence stress and mood, the health information and health-promoting behaviors encouraged in some programs, and potentially through psychoneuroimmunological mechanisms linking psychological wellbeing to immune function and disease resistance (Gaia et al., 2024; Rynkowska, 2020).

Brazilian research has particularly emphasized the preventive gerontology functions of U3A programs, positioning them as vehicles for health promotion and disease prevention among aging populations (Nascimento & Giannouli, 2019; Rynkowska, 2020; Veras & Caldas, 2004). Programs that integrate health education, physical activity, and wellness promotion with intellectual and cultural activities create comprehensive interventions that address multiple dimensions of healthy aging simultaneously (Nascimento & Giannouli, 2019). Participants in these integrated programs report improved health behaviors including increased physical activity, better nutrition, more regular health screenings, and reduced tobacco and alcohol use, suggesting that educational contexts can serve as platforms for health promotion messages and peer influence toward healthier lifestyles (Veras & Caldas, 2004). The social support and accountability provided by regular group participation may reinforce health behavior changes, with participants encouraging one another and creating social norms that favor active, healthy aging (Nascimento & Giannouli, 2019; Rynkowska, 2020).

Quality of life research has consistently found positive associations between U3A participation and various quality of life domains, including physical, psychological, social, and environmental dimensions (Gaia et al., 2024; Vilaplana Prieto, 2010; Wong, 2013). Participants report higher life satisfaction, greater happiness, stronger sense of purpose and meaning, better social relationships, and more positive evaluations of their living environments compared to non-participants or

compared to their own pre-participation assessments (Gaia et al., 2024; Vilaplana Prieto, 2010). These quality-of-life benefits appear to accumulate over time, with longer-term participants reporting greater benefits than recent joiners, though again causality remains uncertain given possible self-selection of more engaged or higher-functioning individuals into sustained participation (Gaia et al., 2024). The multidimensional nature of quality-of-life improvements suggests that U3A participation influences wellbeing through multiple pathways rather than through any single mechanism, creating synergies among cognitive engagement, social connection, physical activity, sense of purpose, and positive identity (Gaia et al., 2024; Vilaplana Prieto, 2010).

Gaia and all (2024) recent scoping review of research on enhancing quality of life for older adults through university education synthesizes evidence from multiple studies and contexts, documenting consistent positive associations between educational participation and quality of life outcomes. Their review identifies cognitive stimulation, social interaction, sense of purpose, and continued personal development as key mechanisms through which educational engagement contributes to wellbeing (Gaia et al., 2024). However, they also note significant methodological limitations in the existing literature, including heavy reliance on cross-sectional designs, self-reported measures, and convenience samples that limit generalizability and causal inference (Gaia et al., 2024). The review calls for more rigorous research designs, including longitudinal studies with appropriate controls, validated outcome measures, and attention to potential mechanisms and moderating factors that might explain who benefits most and under what conditions (Gaia et al., 2024).

### *Civic engagement and social contribution*

Beyond benefits to individual participants, Universities of the Third Age generate broader social value through their contributions to civic engagement, social capital, and community capacity (Findsen, 2019; Formosa, 2014; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). U3A members demonstrate higher levels of civic participation compared to non-participating peers, including voting, attending public meetings, volunteering for

community organizations, and engaging in political and social advocacy (Findsen, 2019; Formosa, 2014). While some of this association likely reflects selection of more civically engaged individuals into U3A participation, qualitative research suggests that educational engagement can also stimulate increased civic involvement by developing knowledge and confidence relevant to civic participation, expanding social networks that facilitate collective action, and fostering identities as active, contributing citizens rather than passive, dependent older persons (Formosa, 2014; Swindell & Vassella, 1997).

The volunteer labor contributed by U3A members represents a substantial but often invisible form of social contribution, with all organizational roles in self-help models and many roles in hybrid models performed without compensation by members who donate their time, expertise, and energy (Findsen, 2019; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). Economic analyses attempting to quantify this contribution by calculating replacement costs at market wage rates have estimated values running into millions of dollars for national U3A networks, suggesting that the collective volunteer effort represents significant social value that would require substantial public expenditure to replace with paid services (Swindell & Vassella, 1997). Beyond these direct organizational contributions, U3A members often extend their volunteering to other community organizations, with research suggesting that educational participation serves as a gateway to broader civic involvement and that the skills, confidence, and networks developed through U3A activities transfer to other forms of social contribution (Findsen, 2019; Formosa, 2014).

The intergenerational dimensions of civic contribution deserve particular attention, as some U3A programs have developed partnerships with schools, youth organizations, and community projects that enable older adults to share their knowledge, skills, and experience with younger generations (Formosa, 2009, 2014). These intergenerational programs create opportunities for knowledge transfer, relationship building across age groups, and mutual learning that benefits both older mentors and younger participants while also challenging age segregation and ageist stereotypes that limit social cohesion (Formosa, 2009). Older adults serving as tutors, mentors, oral historians, or skilled craft instructors provide valuable services to young

people while also experiencing the satisfaction and sense of purpose that comes from contributing to others' development and to community wellbeing (Formosa, 2014).

The collective knowledge and expertise represented by U3A memberships constitute a form of social capital that extends beyond individual participants to benefit communities and societies (Findsen, 2019; Formosa, 2014; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). When older adults with decades of professional experience, specialized knowledge, and accumulated wisdom remain engaged and connected through educational communities rather than becoming isolated and disconnected after retirement, societies retain access to valuable human resources that can be mobilized for various purposes (Findsen, 2019; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). U3A networks have been activated to contribute to community projects, provide expertise for local initiatives, document local history and cultural heritage, and participate in policy consultations on aging-related issues, demonstrating how educational communities can serve as platforms for social contribution and civic engagement that benefit the broader society (Findsen, 2019; Formosa, 2014).

## 5. Policy implications

The global proliferation of Third Age Universities (U3A) robustly confirms older adults' profound desire for sustained learning and social engagement. However, the movement's persistent, limited reach, coupled with enduring inequities, underscores the deep inadequacy of current policy frameworks. Moving forward, targeted policy interventions are indispensable, operating across multiple jurisdictional levels.

Foremost, governments must fundamentally acknowledge third age education not as optional enrichment, but as essential public infrastructure. Systematic, reliable funding streams are required not only to stabilize existing programs but critically, to enable their necessary expansion and to finance key equity initiatives. Such sustained public investment directly reflects the needs of rapidly aging societies, functioning strategically as a key component of effective active aging policies (Formosa, 2019).

Concerted and targeted efforts are further required to dismantle existing socioeconomic, educational, and cultural barriers that currently

restrict access. This means implementing measures such as subsidized or entirely free programs specifically for low-income older adults, coupled with deliberate, proactive outreach toward underserved communities. Furthermore, programs must feature culturally adapted content and provide necessary accessibility accommodations. Where university-linked models exist, they should be mandated to leverage their institutional resources to drive these vital equity initiatives forward.

The challenge of digital inclusion demands a response that extends far beyond merely providing internet access. Older adults require access to appropriate devices, affordable connectivity solutions, specialized digital literacy training, and critically, ongoing technical support mechanisms. Recognizing the wide spectrum of needs and individual preferences, programs must thoughtfully offer and integrate both online and in-person learning modalities.

As U3A programs continue to proliferate, the issue of quality assurance emerges as paramount. This pursuit of quality does not equate to standardization—local adaptation remains a crucial factor—but rather requires ensuring that programs effectively meet older adults' evolving needs through demonstrably qualified instruction, suitable facilities, and truly responsive governance structures.

Finally, the policy domain urgently requires a more robust evidence base to ascertain what truly works, for whom, and crucially, under specific conditions. This evidence gap demands the implementation of rigorous longitudinal studies, along with quasi-experimental designs, specifically engineered to investigate causal mechanisms linking participation to outcomes, particularly focusing research on often underserved populations. Systematic international comparative research also plays a pivotal role, helping to identify effective and transferable practices that successfully cross diverse national contexts.

## 6. Conclusion

Universities of the Third Age represent a major global movement in lifelong learning that has evolved over five decades from modest European origins to encompassing diverse programs serving millions of older adults across continents (Casanova et al., 2023; Formosa, 2014,

2019a). This analysis has traced the movement's historical development from its dual origins in French university-linked programs and British self-help initiatives through subsequent international diffusion and local adaptation that has produced rich organizational and pedagogical diversity (Casanova et al., 2023; Formosa, 2014). The contrast between institutional affiliation and autonomous mutual aid as organizing principles has shaped trajectories of growth and legitimacy, with many countries developing hybrid forms that combine elements of both foundational models while introducing innovations reflecting local contexts and priorities (Casanova et al., 2023; Formosa, 2014; Jun & Evans, 2014; Nascimento & Giannouli, 2019).

The evidence regarding outcomes and benefits, while methodologically limited by reliance on observational studies and self-reported measures, demonstrates consistent positive associations between U3A participation and cognitive engagement, social connection, wellbeing, and civic involvement in different settings (Findsen, 2019; Formosa, 2014; Gaia et al., 2024; Swindell & Vassella, 1997; Vilaplana Prieto, 2010; Wong, 2013). These findings suggest that third age education contributes to multiple dimensions of active aging and human flourishing, providing intellectual stimulation, social integration, and sense of purpose that enhance quality of life during later years (Formosa, 2019; Gaia et al., 2024; Rynkowska, 2020). The social capital generated through U3A networks extends benefits beyond individual participants to communities and societies through volunteer contributions, civic engagement, and strengthened social cohesion (Findsen, 2019; Formosa, 2014; Swindell & Vassella, 1997).

However, challenges persist that limit the movement's reach and impact (Formosa, 2009, 2014; Martín García & Requejo Osorio, 2005). Persistent inequalities in access and participation mean that programs often serve already-advantaged older adults rather than those who might benefit most from educational opportunities and social connection (Formosa, 2009, 2014). Digital divides create new barriers even as technology offers possibilities for expanded access (Sobral & Sobral, 2021). Organizational sustainability challenges threaten continuity and quality, particularly for volunteer-based programs (Findsen, 2019; Formosa, 2009). Policy frameworks and funding

mechanisms remain underdeveloped in most contexts, limiting the potential of third age education to contribute fully to active aging strategies and lifelong learning systems (Formosa, 2014; Martín García & Requejo Osorio, 2005; Vasilenko, 2023).

The digital transformation accelerated by pandemic conditions has revealed both opportunities and risks, demonstrating that online delivery can expand geographic reach and accommodate mobility limitations while also exposing significant proportions of older adults who lack technological access, digital skills, or comfort with virtual environments (Sobral & Sobral, 2021).

Moving forward, hybrid models that thoughtfully integrate online and in-person elements while ensuring digital inclusion through infrastructure, skills development, and support systems offer possibilities for enhancing accessibility and flexibility without sacrificing the social connection and spontaneous interaction that characterize valuable educational experiences (Sobral & Sobral, 2021).

For countries experiencing rapid demographic aging, including Romania, international experience with Universities of the Third Age offers valuable lessons while also highlighting the importance of cultural adaptation and context-appropriate implementation (Casanova et al., 2023; Chen & Guo, 2020; Formosa, 2019). Diverse organizational models, strategic digitalization, explicit policy frameworks, equity-focused initiatives, and international exchange can support development of programs that serve heterogeneous older adult populations and contribute to active aging, social cohesion, and individual flourishing (Chen & Guo, 2020; Formosa, 2009, 2019a; Vasilenko, 2023).

Looking forward, strengthening third age education requires coordinated action across multiple domains (Formosa, 2009, 2019a;

Vasilenko, 2023). Comprehensive policy frameworks must position these programs within lifelong learning systems and active aging strategies with appropriate funding, regulatory clarity, and cross-sectoral integration (Formosa, 2014, 2019a; Vasilenko, 2023). Equity and inclusion strategies must address persistent barriers through targeted outreach, barrier reduction, and inclusive organizational cultures (Formosa, 2009; Martín García & Requejo Osorio, 2005). Digital transformation must be pursued strategically with explicit attention to access, literacy, and support that enable all older adults to benefit (Sobral & Sobral, 2021). Research and evaluation systems must be strengthened to offer evidence regarding outcomes, mechanisms, and effective practices (Gaia et al., 2024; Rynkowska, 2020). International collaboration must facilitate mutual learning and knowledge exchange in different settings (Casanova et al., 2023; Formosa, 2014).

The Universities of the Third Age movement indicates that learning is indeed lifelong, that older adults possess tremendous capacity for continued growth and contribution, and that educational opportunities in later life represent investments not only in individual wellbeing but in social capital, community vitality, and intergenerational solidarity (Findsen, 2019; Formosa, 2014, 2019a; Swindell & Vassella, 1997). In an aging world facing demographic, technological, and social transformations, these lessons deserve serious attention from educators, policymakers, researchers, and citizens (Casanova et al., 2023; Formosa, 2019). The question is not whether societies will invest in third age education, but how to do so most effectively, equitably, and sustainably in ways that honor older adults' dignity and capabilities while contributing to collective flourishing across generations and communities (Formosa, 2019; Vasilenko, 2023).

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