

Learning in Rural Areas in Castellón (Spain)¹

Introduction

Lifelong education is a right and a duty for everyone. The rural elderly is undoubtedly one of the groups that have traditionally faced greater difficulties in accessing lifelong learning programmes.

The lifelong learning programme at the Jaume I University (Senior Citizens' University SCU) in Spain is also applied in rural areas. This gives people living further from the city the opportunity to expand their knowledge, share experiences and establish links with the rest of society.

The objective of this programme is to ensure full and equal access of opportunity to cultural assets through permanent programmes designed to be generous and caring, and to encourage the development of more educated, critical and committed individuals, thereby increasing quality of life among the elderly population. The rural elderly have the same concerns as their urban counterparts and the same fundamental rights to receive lifelong education.

The benefits of education are not only limited to those who receive it directly; it also has an impact on the whole community. For this reason the social and political agents in the towns where the lifelong learning programme is run play an important role in promoting, identifying direct needs, disseminating and coordinating lifelong learning among the adult population. Public and private agencies work together to promote courses and activities to ensure that the needs of this rapidly growing sector of the population are met and to foster greater welfare and personal realization that will enhance their quality of life.

Content

The lifelong learning programme at Jaume I University in Spain provides courses for people over the age of 55, in an attempt to respond to their wishes to expand their education and their overall development. Through this programme, the University aims to contribute to improving the human capacities of the elderly in rural areas, both in terms of their academic development and their integration and social development. To this end, opportunities for reflection freely are provided, thus enabling the exchange of knowledge and experiences.

University education for senior learners is not intended to prepare individuals for a professional career, but is primarily designed to foster students' personal development and encourage them in the task of contributing to the cultural development of our society.

Older people in rural areas are, undoubtedly, one of the groups that have traditionally faced greater difficulties in accessing lifelong learning programmes. This programme aims to give people who do not live near the city of Castellón the opportunity to expand their knowledge and share experiences.

To promote the education of the elderly in rural areas, the methodology should be active, participatory, social, open and understanding, in order to provide opportunities to recreate the life of the elderly, giving a new meaning to their life experience.

Hence, this lifelong learning programme employs a teaching methodology suited to education of the elderly learner that is reflected in the content of the subjects taught. The syllabus of the programme for the elderly in rural areas generally has the following characteristics:

- Tends towards concrete issues and is based on observation and discovery.
- Stimulates activity and takes into account the principle of 'learning by doing'.
- Activities are varied and avoid becoming routine and boring.
- Encourages participation and group work.

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It should be noted that Information and Communication Technologies¹ have altered society's access to information and learning and have a significant influence in the field of knowledge. In consequence, and in relation to the senior learner's 'digital literacy' as part of the lifelong learning process, it should be remembered that both digital tools and lifelong learning should be for all, regardless of age, to enhance meaningful social participation, strengthen their social support networks and self-esteem, and enable them to benefit from the material advantages that ICT can bring. This can be even more pertinent in rural areas with low population densities and scarce resources. In sum, ICT improve their quality of life. This new computer literacy has to enable seniors to use the computer to construct their own learning.

Access to ICT is becoming easier due to support from official agencies. However, the distinction should be made between urban areas, where public connection points are, common and rural areas, where availability is limited. In urban areas material well-being is therefore covered.

ICT have a positive influence on the perception of quality of life, providing not only access to information and communication, but facilitating networks among people. These are especially useful in rural populations either because they are in remote areas, or because transport connections between them are poor. Without ICT, there would be a greater tendency towards isolation, which detracts from quality of life.

If we understand self-determination as the personal faculty that enables people to take their own decisions, and act in consequence of them, and if we consider that access to information is an indispensable requirement for making conscious and effective decisions, it is clear that ICT, especially the Internet, are particularly useful in such processes, facilitating knowledge of the environment and opening up possibilities to act on it. Because of the lack of services in rural areas (banks, administrative agencies, commerce) ICT play a huge role not only in providing access to information, but in allowing people to perform transactions online.

ICT related subjects are heavily emphasised in the rural lifelong learning programme. The teaching plan is as follows:

- Computer courses at different levels (basic, intermediate, advanced), but where students are not only taught how to use a new tool, but to foster links with each other, enabling them to keep in touch and share from their own homes. 'Learning' thus becomes an excuse to continue practicing at home and communicate with each other.
- On-line or virtual classes: access to virtual classes allows learners to continue learning without having to move and to practice using technological tools, and although the online mode is limited, it imitates the social contact that take place in a face-to-face class.

Recommendations

Education in rural areas is often neglected due to insufficient demand (because the population is more dispersed), access to facilities (classrooms, technology), expenses and organisation. However, the effort invested, if done properly, can bring even greater benefits by meeting the needs and concerns of elderly education in rural areas that in urban areas are amply satisfied.

Lifelong learning (understood as a psychosocial activity) for the elderly in rural areas is pivotal in improving their quality of life, as it facilitates personal interaction processes in which active roles are acquired in activities that are perceived as beneficial.

Hence, education and training, Internet access and geographical variables (rural environment) are three interconnected factors in the programme. These should be considered together to provide an adequate quality of life for individuals. The need for personal development is satisfied through the acquisition of new knowledge and being in a lifelong learning process, which allows certain personal concerns, knowledge, training and information, activities, contacts, and so on, to be realised. Knowledge and ICT therefore provide opportunities to use all possible means that are potentially available in today's society for the personal development of the rural elderly

Some of the objectives of lifelong education programmes in rural areas, as detailed above, are to:

- Value the importance of what culture contributes in rural areas, through the implementation of education as a continuous process.
- Help each individual recognise the direction their own thoughts are going, in relation to their wishes, thus opening the way to better understand and operate in today's reality.
- Increase outreach to rural areas and share with rural populations the practice of experiences that prove enriching.
- Become aware of how important this experience can be and evaluate it in order to address the most important issues for new programmes.
- Develop the students' research autonomy, as it is students who explore freely and focus their research on issues they consider most appropriate to their ultimate goals.
- Ensure that students cease to be mere recipients of knowledge and take centre stage in their learning.
- Teach by using ICT that these technologies offer older students an ideal opportunity to learn, while at the same time turning them into critical researchers.

In conclusion, we highlight some of the issues raised previously in the implementation of a programme of lifelong education in rural areas:

- The socio-political agents in each town are very important in promoting lifelong education among the adult population.
- The methodology must be active, participatory, social, open and understanding in order to provide opportunities to recreate the life of the elderly, giving a new meaning to their life experience.
- The topics dealt with in the teaching plan typically:
 - Are specific and based on observation and discovery.
 - Stimulate activity and take into account the principle of 'learning by doing'.
 - The activities carried out are varied and avoid becoming routine and boring.
 - Improving participants' quality of life through participation and group work should be encouraged in applying the programme.
- The processes of interaction and personal development are favoured. Social participation is more significant, strengthening their social support networks and self-esteem, and hence the elderly benefit from the material advantages of ICT.

References

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