

A proposal for a formal course structure and its potentialities ¹

Introduction

Adult education institutions commonly offer senior citizens some choice in the courses and activities they wish to enrol on. If the institution runs courses in, for instance, philosophy, sociology, history, arts, gerontology and health, learners can choose the ones that most appeal to them and disregard the knowledge areas they find less interesting.

The course structure at the Senior Citizens' University is more formal than this. Although it cannot strictly be considered 'formal' because the courses do not lead to an official degree, 'formal' in this case should be understood as a 'structured' and 'strict', rather than 'non-formal', which in this text is understood to mean 'free choice' and 'variable'.

Offering senior citizens a formal course structure may appear to limit their freedom of choice and oblige them to study subjects they do not like, which can be interpreted as a negative aspect, particularly because they are motivated to enrol on the courses for personal reasons, pleasure or curiosity.

However, this more formal course structure greatly benefits senior learners' Quality of Life (QoL), and it is commonly adopted by seniors' educational programmes in Spanish universities.

Content

The Senior Citizens' University at the Jaume I University began in 1998 with 38 students. From the outset, learners were not given a choice; they registered for a package of 10 subjects, each with 15 hours teaching, a total of 150 classroom hours in one academic year. A three-year degree was established. Now more than 1 000 learners attend one of the three year courses at the university. The subjects come from the areas of philosophy, psychology, sociology, arts, history, ethics, economics, family, gerontology, citizenship, health, technology, and learning to learn:

First course:

- Philosophy and culture of coexistence
- Adult psycho-social identity
- Genesis and structure of the family
- The geographical environment: natural and human landscapes
- Justice and law: practical issues
- Europe: significance, history and culture
- Historical heritage of the Valencian² people
- Health education
- Writing workshop
- Science, technology and culture
- Socio-cultural promotion: leisure and free time
- Learning network

Second course:

- Introduction to sociology
- Lessons from economics
- Multiculturalism: lifestyles and current conflicts
- Art history

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² 'Valencian' is the name that receive the people that live in the region where the SCU is located. 'Castellón' is the official name for this region.

- Cultural roots of the Valencian people
- Major environmental problems of our time
- Citizens' rights and duties
- Medieval history
- Health education and physical activity
- Stress, emotions and wellbeing
- Socio-cultural promotion: active cultural participation
- Study skills and academic organisatio

Third course

- Society and information technology
- Music education
- Contemporary art
- Analysis of literary works and their authors
- Ethics and politics
- Saving and investment in households
- Introduction to the Constitution and its framework
- Modern history
- The culture of Castellón and its framework
- Seniors in today's society
- Socio-cultural promotion: learning about our heritage
- Contemporary history
- Research techniques and projects
- Final project

One disadvantage of this structure may be that students feel obliged to take subjects they do not like. In the SCU this problem does not arise however, because as an adult education programme run in a university, it is regarded as normal to enrol for a full academic year (as in a secondary school or for a formal degree) with all the subjects that course entails. Students can also enrol on the optional subjects of language and technology, common to all academic years. They can attend the level best suited to their skills and their specific needs or motivation.

On the other hand, this structure provides great advantages related to the impact on senior learners' QoL, namely:

- The three-year subject content has been carefully designed, aimed to provide senior learners with a basic knowledge of the society in which they live (history, arts), the changes they experience (physically and socially) and the necessary skills to adapt and learn collaboratively (learn by research). This three-year path should be followed completely from beginning to end because all the subjects are important and provide knowledge which senior learners need.
- Learners begin the first academic course in a class with 40-50 other students who will continue through subsequent academic years, enabling links to be forged among learners, and creating networks of support, trust, and friendship, which has significant long-term benefits.
- As all the students know each other, it is easier for the teacher to prepare group work and class discussions and debates. Learners develop a growing capacity to share opinions, express their thoughts and support their ideas. As the group members get to know each other better, even shy or introverted learners gain the confidence to participate.
- This structure does not allow teachers to get to know all the learners well; each teacher only has ten ninety-minute classes with each group. But each course has a tutor, namely, a member of staff who acts as a facilitator. Each tutor is assigned to two or three courses. The role of the tutor is to respond to questions about timetables, general course structure or any other administrative issues. But what is more important, tutors

are facilitators who encourage the inclusion of all learners and attempt to solve any problems or conflicts that arise in the group.

- As all the learners know each other, and that relationship lasts for three years, it creates a group feeling: everybody feels part of the Senior Citizens' University, but also part of a group, which increases the feeling of inclusion. Other beneficial actions emerge out of this relationship, such as the organisation of parallel social events, extra-curricular activities, or leisure activities. All groups elect two delegates who act as learners' representatives on the learners' board. This learners' board represents all the learners when providing feedback, proposing activities, requesting information or any other suggestion to the Senior Citizens' University Managers.
- Apart from the more formal, classroom-based subjects, all students can take part in academic activities outside the class such as visits to museums, cities, one-day cultural trips, etc. These activities are used to complement the regular classroom-based subjects and although they have an academic purpose, it is fair to say that learners gain a great deal of enjoyment from them, firstly because they have the opportunity to spend time with their classmates in a more informal environment, and secondly, because they discover more about neighbouring cities or cultural sites from a new perspective after having learnt the theory in class.

Recommendations

At the SCU, there are two groups on each of the three courses of the first degree, a total of six groups. When students finish the third course, many want to continue learning and the SCU must respond to this motivation. We offer a choice of four study programmes (similar to a Master's degree in formal higher education), but the subjects are still mandatory. Two of the Master's degrees change every two years. Each Master centres on one topic: history, arts, quality of life, etc.

It can be difficult for some institutions to create such a structured offer for senior learners, which they may not be used to doing, either because senior learners are not used to this kind of formality or because it might not be the main aim of the institution. However, this design has great advantages, and in some cases, certain attitudes and competences can only be achieved by belonging to a group over a long period, with all that involves. Some of these advantages are:

- An increased sense of belonging to a community with common interests, which also helps to forge new links between people who did not know each other before, and to create a new role for themselves (a new self).
- The pedagogy applied in the classes (participation, discussion and debate) includes those who are usually shy or introverted, and also because they can feel support from the group, their skills of communication and expression develop, and they are more able to defend and support their ideas.
- Regular contact with the same classmates provides fertile ground for social relationships, usually for support, advice and help in a variety of aspects including personal, family or health problems. Although this type of support is not directly facilitated by the SCU (it is not its mission), qualitative interviews have shown that it is very significant for the receiver, and important for the giver. This support is also found in positive activities such as working together on a common project or hobby.
- Acquiring a broad perspective on ideas, problems, opportunities, etc., in other words, learning that can only occur informally, in the corridors, cafeterias, etc.

The SCU also offers extra-curricular activities outside class, such as cultural trips and visits to sites of interest or museums. Optional ICT subjects and language classes are also available, and are open to all students, regardless of the course they are enrolled on. It is much more difficult to create a sense of group belonging in these subjects, because it is the learners themselves who decide which level or ICT tool they wish to register in, but it is fair to say that learners frequently attend extra-curricular activities and enrol in a specific ICT group only because their classmates are also enrolled in that group. This could be regarded as negative: a student enrolls

on a course despite not being motivated or interested in the subject itself. However, the opposite seems to occur: is a classmate's personal motivation not also a very good reason to learn something new? In this case, classmates are also a reason to continue learning and enjoying the acquisition of new knowledge. Social contact and learning in this environment create a synergy that leads to better quality social relationships and more knowledge that goes beyond the subject itself.

This text is part of the book “Education and quality of life of senior citizens”. See the full book in <http://www.edusenior.eu>

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