

# THE POSSIBILITIES OF UNIVERSITIES SUPPORTING ACTIVE AND POSITIVE AGEING

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## Abstract

*This study explores the role of higher education in fostering active and positive ageing, aiming to address the economic and social challenges posed by an ageing society. Universities can play a prominent and important role in preserving the mental and physical health of older generations, in maintaining their long-term labor market and social activities. In this research, I present the social challenges of aging by analyzing statistical data and, by processing and analyzing good practices, I intend to make an innovative proposal on the possible role of universities in active aging.*

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## 1 Introduction

More and more actors in politics, economics, society and science recognize that one of the most significant economic and social challenges of postmodern civilizations in the 21st century is the ageing of society. Population ageing is a trend that can be observed globally, but it is a particularly complex problem in the European Union and in developed countries of the world. The dramatic increase in the life expectancy of the population – thanks to the development of healthcare and living conditions – is resulting in the emergence of super-aged societies. All this is accompanied by a decrease in the number of births in many European countries, which further strengthens unfavorable demographic processes. In these societies, the proportion of people over 65 years of age will exceed 25% by the second third of the 21st century. These demographic processes not only raise the issue of economic and social sustainability but also have an impact on labor-market and employment processes, as well as the security of the pension and health-care systems. [1]

The responses we can provide to the challenges of ageing are of great importance for the well-being and cohesion of society. Higher education institutions, as centers of knowledge sharing and innovation of intellectual activity, can play a decisive role in increasing the labor market and social participation of older generations, supporting active ageing, and preserving mental and physical health.

Due to the increase in life expectancy, a new stage of life has emerged in super-aged societies, the era of ageing, which includes numerous opportunities and tasks. The main problem is that we do not yet have the appropriate practice to fill this new stage of life usefully and meaningfully, and we do not have adequate norms and traditions for spending the era of ageing meaningfully and healthily.

Over the past decades, universities have increasingly recognized the importance of training older generations supporting lifelong learning, and establishing senior university courses, in addition to their basic tasks of research and development and educating the 18-25-year-old age group for the labor market. The demand for universities' services related to active ageing and specifically for people over 65 is increasing in connection with the increase in the number of older generations.

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## 2 The challenges of an ageing society and the possible roles of universities

Population ageing is one of the basic processes of demographic change. As society ages, the changes extend beyond the number and proportion of elderly, young, and working-age individuals. The process fundamentally alters the entire age composition, reshaping the population's age structure and the 'age tree' that represents it. Therefore, we must learn to live with this, and social measures must – with long-term thinking – prevent or at least follow the challenges that arise in this way. At the same time, ageing is a long-term process, its effects unfold slowly but with very significant force, and the appropriate responses are extremely complex in both economic and social terms. For this reason, actors in both the economy and society must be prepared to deal with the effects and develop appropriate solutions.[2]

For decades, sociologists and social researchers have drawn attention to the fact that demographic ageing may result in complex economic and social challenges in a significant number of European Union member states. According to EUROSTAT data, the ratio of people aged 65 and over increased by an average of 3 percentage points in EU member states between 2013 and 2023.

**Increase in the share of the population aged 65 years and over between 2013 and 2023**  
(percentage points)

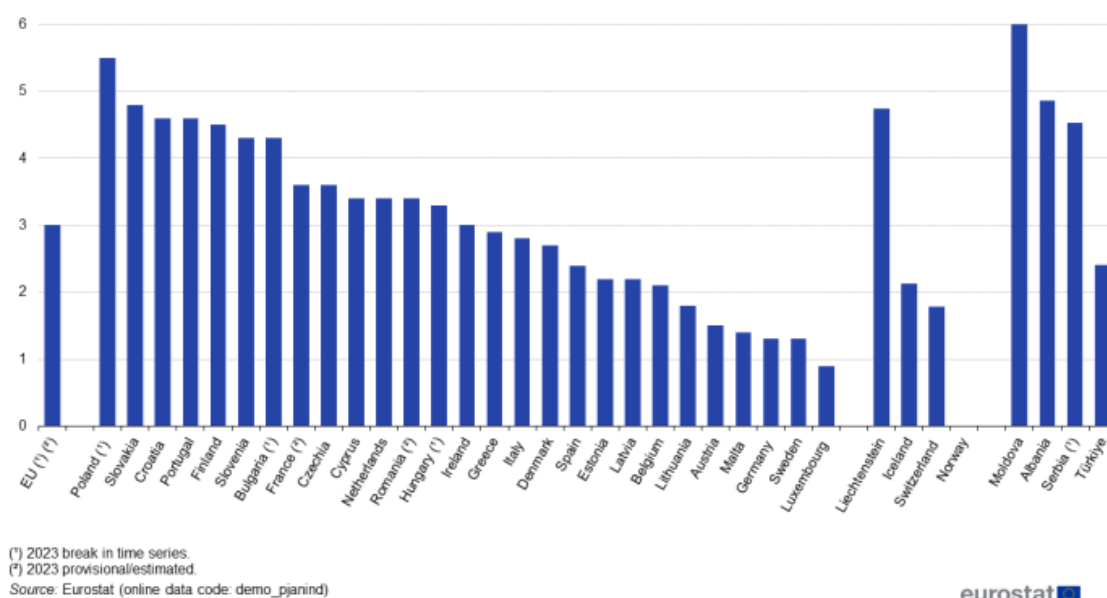
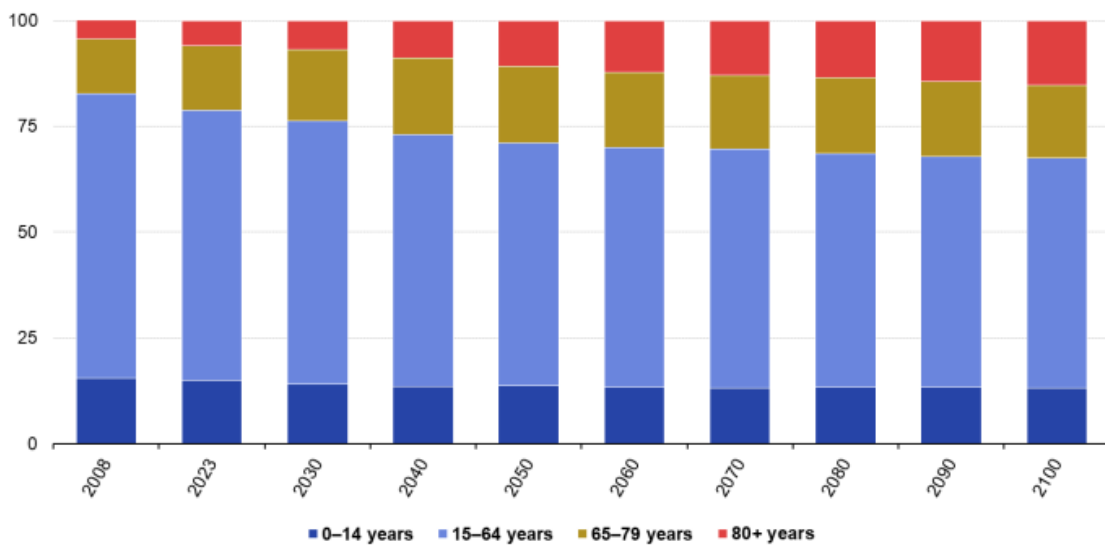


Figure 1. Increase in the share of the population aged 65 years and over between 2013 and 2023 (percentage points) Source: Eurostat ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population\\_structure\\_and\\_ageing](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_structure_and_ageing) 01. 26. 2025.)

The further ageing of society is expected to remain a defining trend in the coming period, and according to calculations, the proportion of people over 65 years of age in the total population is expected to approach 25% in a decade and a half and could reach as much as 30% by 2050.

**Population structure by major age groups, EU, 2008-2100**  
(% of total population)



Note: 2023: provisional/estimated. 2030–2100: projections (EUROPOP2023).  
Source: Eurostat (online data codes: demo\_pjanind and proj\_23np)

eurostat 

Figure 2. Population structure by major age groups, EU, 2008-2100 (% of total population)

Source: Eurostat ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population\\_structure\\_and\\_ageing](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_structure_and_ageing) 01. 26. 2025.)

In Hungary, social ageing can be partly attributed to improving life expectancy, but to a greater extent to low fertility. In 1990, 13% of the Hungarian population was aged 65 or over, while in 2020 it was already 20%. At the beginning of 2020, according to data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), 1 million 942 thousand people over the age of 65 lived in Hungary, of whom 439 thousand had already reached the age of 80, and 65 thousand had already reached the age of 90. In our country, the old-age dependency rate, calculated from the ratio of people aged 20–64 to people over 65, increased from 23 to 33 between 1990 and 2019, and the expected value of this indicator will increase to 39 by 2040 and 52 by 2060.[3]

## 2.1 Sustainability of the pension and the healthcare system

Among the challenges arising from the ageing of society, the issue of the sustainability of the pension systems developed over the past decades, as well as the burden of the expected increase in central resources spent on healthcare expenses and elderly care, stand out. It is well known that more pensioners mean increased pressure on pension systems and social insurance; consequently, governments may have to modify the retirement age and pension benefits in order to maintain sustainability. One of the key issues of ageing is how the physical and mental health of older generations changes with age, since those with better health may be able to remain active longer. All this can be beneficial for employment and the labor market, but it can also positively influence social activities, consumption, and reduce the burden on healthcare. The health of elderly individuals positively impacts families and communities. Healthier seniors not only alleviate the caregiving burden on working-age family members but can also actively support younger generations by assisting with childcare or contributing to the well-being of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

Unfortunately, based on statistical data, the health status and employment rate of the population over 65 in Hungary today are worse than the average level in the European Union.[4] It is; therefore, worth drawing attention to the importance of maintaining the mental and physical health of an ageing society, both from the perspective of care systems and labor market activities.

## **2.2 The challenges of the labor market and the employment system**

As an American study has shown, the ageing of society significantly impacts the labor market and employment systems in several ways.[5] Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policies and innovative solutions to ensure a balanced and sustainable labor market.

One of the most significant impacts is the shrinking labor pool, as a shrinking working-age population can lead to labor shortages affecting productivity and economic growth. Encouraging older adults to remain in the workforce longer and promoting lifelong learning are potential solutions. As the population ages, the proportion of working-age individuals decreases, and this leads to a smaller labor pool, making it harder for employers to find suitable candidates. This is accompanied by a shortage of labor market skills and competencies, as older workers often retire with valuable skills and experience that are not easily replaced, and this can create serious skill gaps in various industries. This may particularly affect the healthcare sector, as there is a simultaneous decline in the skilled workforce and an increasing demand from the elderly. With more elderly individuals, there is a higher demand for healthcare services, leading to a greater need for healthcare professionals.

Regarding the effects of the employment system, it is important to mention the development of the adaptive capacity of workplaces since employers may need to adapt workplaces to accommodate older workers including ergonomic adjustments and flexible working hours. In addition, lifelong learning and retraining programs also play an important role in keeping older workers on the labor market. Education systems also have a significant role to contribute to this process.

In Hungary, the employment rate of 57–64-year-olds was extremely low at around 30 percent in the early 2000s, but it has increased dynamically in the past decade and exceeded 60 percent by 2020. In addition to the increase in labor market activity, it should also be noted that three-quarters of the elderly in Hungary, who are still at working age, want to retire as soon as possible.[6] The health of the individuals also plays an important role in labor market activity, but in Hungary, for example, educational attainment – and; moreover,, the ability to renew knowledge and competencies – determines how long an individual can remain active in the labor market. Besides, we should not forget that older workers have many advantages in terms of labor market competencies and experience – for instance, loyalty, commitment, work performance, value creation, less need for special benefits, lower turnover, or strong work ethic – which allow them to remain competitive and valuable to employers and companies. In order to involve generations over 65 more effectively in the labor market, we need to better understand the needs, intentions, and experiences of these age groups related to the world of work.

## **2.3 Ageing, economic growth and the innovative capacity of society**

A key issue for both the long-term maintenance of economic growth and ensuring national and community competitiveness is the extent to which ageing societies are able to preserve and develop the capabilities of older generations and to what extent they can involve them in innovation processes. It is well known that an ageing population can slow down economic growth through declining activity, declining consumer spending and lower involvement in innovation processes.

The needs of an ageing society force social and economic actors involved in the development of infrastructure, urban services and public safety to adapt the infrastructure, services and conditions of residential properties of settlements to the needs of the ageing population. This includes barrier-free housing, safe transportation, barrier-free public transport, community services and public safety.

Age-friendly development of cities, age-friendly renewal and redesign of services play a key role in terms of economic development and sustainability. The World Health Organization (WHO) launched the Global Age-friendly Cities program in 2005, in which outdoor spaces, transportation, housing, community participation, access to services, respect and dignity, participation in public affairs, employment opportunities, effective communication and information flow, as well as health support are evaluated for their compliance with age-friendly criteria. Since then, many large cities and smaller settlements around the world have joined the program.[7] The presentation and analysis of good practices in England and France will hopefully be an incentive for age-friendly settlement development in Hungary as well.[8]

In recent years, several outstanding local social innovations have been launched in Hungary to support the activity and digital awareness of older generations. Notably, the CédrusNet Kecskemét project stands out, which is working on creating an innovative and proactive community in Kecskemét, in the geographical center of Hungary. This project aims to show new directions and solutions defying stereotypes about ageing, and to create opportunities for those who want to stay active in their older age.[9] Special emphasis is placed on social activities and digital transformation, which can also contribute to the development of the local economy and society.[10]

Digital transformation and artificial intelligence have also gained a prominent role in the quality of life and labor market capabilities of the elderly in recent years. Strengthening the innovative capacity of society largely depends on the level of digital capabilities of the older generations and their ability to apply and absorb new technological innovations.

In terms of active ageing and well-being, the successful integration of the older generation into the information society is the key issue. The development of information and communication technologies related to services provided to the elderly and the spread of safe Internet use have received great emphasis during the EU development cycles. Statistical surveys show that in a few years, the quality of Internet use and conscious Internet use among the elderly will be a much more important distinguishing factor than the mere presence or absence of Internet use because Internet use is expected to be integrated into the natural activities of everyday life for the 65+ age group as well.[9] Good practices now include projects that support the social and physical activities and digital competencies of people over 60 through gardening, including the development of mobile applications.[11]

This is why it is increasingly important for higher education institutions to play a role in promoting the use of the Internet, social media, and digital devices in older adults, whether in the areas of information search and sharing, cybersecurity, or artificial intelligence.

## **2.4 Generational cooperation and social inclusion**

The ageing of society affects social relationships, including intra-family and social relationships, as well as intergenerational cooperation. The ageing process is also influenced by changes in social relationships and individual psychosocial factors. Ageing and the decline of mental and physical health can be accompanied by a loss of autonomy and independence. This means that the elderly often cannot remain in their usual environment, and difficulties are often caused by the narrowing of family, relative and friend relationships, the loss of a spouse, and the decreasing ability to provide for themselves, all of which contribute to isolation and loneliness as they age. Consequently, a key task for mainstream society is to prevent the social exclusion of the elderly and people with disabilities.

There are countless opportunities for the elderly to play a role and become socially involved in society. These include, for example, caring for children as grandparents, caring for other adults, volunteering, and all of these can provide ample scope for those who are suitable for this due to their health condition or personal internal motivation. This can be complemented by involvement in social life or the civil sphere, provided that the conditions for social participation are available. According to surveys, nearly four-fifths of Hungarians believe that the elderly are useful and valued members of society, and that caring for them is a joint task of the state and families. Promoting relationships and cooperation between generations may also be important in part because the elderly can serve as role models in the transfer of certain subject knowledge and life strategies, which can have a positive impact on several generations. In the world of work and everyday life, the experiences, advice and help of the older generation can be important for young people, which they can apply usefully both in the labor market and in their family life.

Researchers also emphasize that in old age, social, family relationships and communities are of particular importance for maintaining health, which provide the experience and joy of belonging, belonging to someone; furthermore it can help avoid the development of loneliness and isolation, as well as its long-term, more serious consequences. That is why, in fact, in every stage of life, we should strive to have not only virtual relationships, but also real personal, friendly and family relationships that develop, complement and support the personality. We can feel very true the statement that active ageing should not only be addressed in old age, but the preparation for it should begin in young adulthood since one of the non-negligible elements of old age experienced as an

active and positive experience lies in the organic connection between generations, mutual support and cooperation.[12]

In connection with social ageing, the importance of intergenerational cooperation is increasingly emphasized, which can play a significant role not only in terms of work efficiency, innovation performance, or the transfer of experience and knowledge, but also in the prevention of social conflicts. Educational institutions play a decisive role in the development of these social skills. In Central Europe, several good practices have emerged with the aim of supporting active ageing, and in Hungary, there are also countless new opportunities for continuous social innovation in the field of supporting active ageing.[13]

One possible form of intergenerational cooperation is fostering shared learning experiences among individuals of different age groups. Due to technological and social changes, intergenerational learning is no longer limited to the transfer of knowledge and expertise within families, but also takes place outside the narrower family relationships. Sharing skills, knowledge and experiences among generations can have several positive effects on knowledge transfer, social and community relations, the effectiveness of knowledge acquisition and competence development, as well as on personality. However, it is important that the forms of intergenerational learning offered by universities, which may include informal or non-formal learning program elements, take into account the specificities and needs of different age groups during the learning process.[14]

It is important that more and more people experience the era of ageing resulting from the increase in life expectancy as an opportunity, as a new stage of life. Social involvement that provides the experience of usefulness plays an indispensable role in this. Targeted programs, events, and opportunities for leisure, as well as mental and physical recreation, provide effective solutions for addressing the needs of the older generation.[15]

### **3 The role of universities in supporting the concept of active ageing**

The European Union has made important progress in recognizing the challenges arising from the ageing of society over the past decade. In order to enable individual Member States to identify and measure the effectiveness of economic and political measures related to ageing, and the utilization of the economic and social opportunities inherent in ageing, the Active Ageing Index (AAI) was developed a decade ago under the coordination of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) to overview older people's living conditions.

The Active Ageing Index is a tool to measure the untapped potential of older people for active and healthy ageing across countries. It measures the level to which older people live independent lives, participate in paid employment and social activities, and their capacity to age actively. The Active Ageing Index consists of 22 indicators, which are grouped into 4 ranges by experts. The index values range from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating a greater exploitation of the potential of older people. According to the developers of the measurement system, achieving 100 points during application is neither realistic nor necessary, but achieving the highest results in the case of a country can be a useful target.[16]

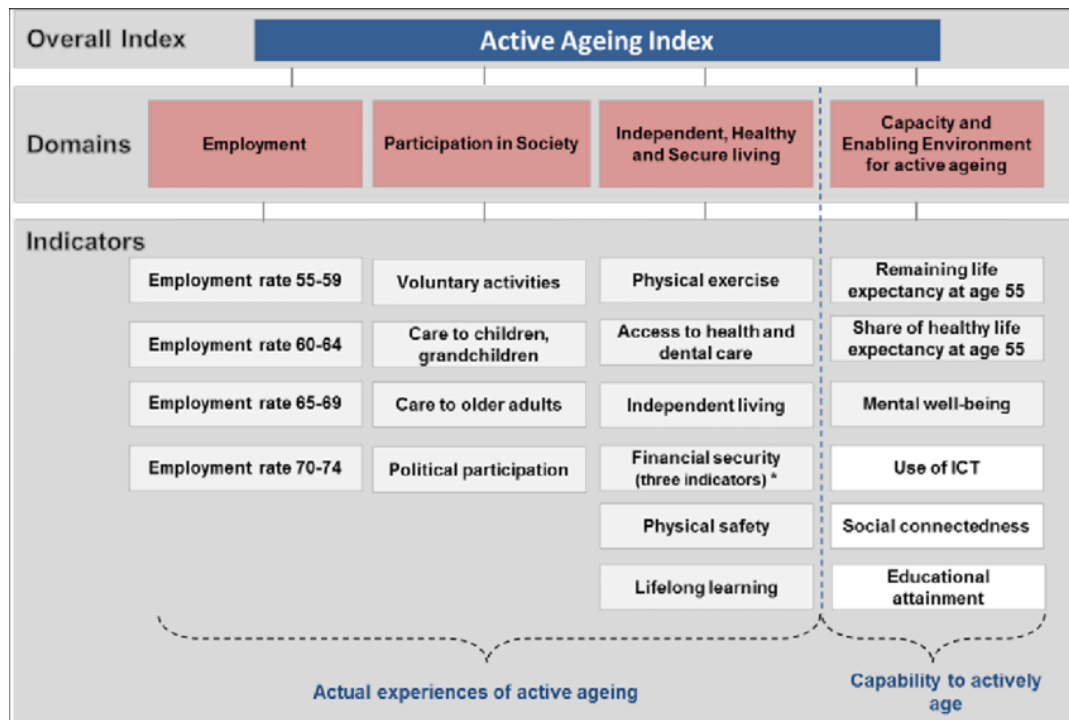


Figure 3. Active Ageing Index, The domains and indicators of the aggregated Index, AAI  
Source: Active Ageing Index

(<https://statswiki.unece.org/spaces/AAI/pages/76285711/Active+Ageing+Index+Home> 01. 26. 2025.)

The Active Ageing Index (AAI) is a composite indicator consisting of 4 sub-areas and 22 indicators, which has been regularly quantified since 2012 from European Union surveys and statistical data.

Among the indicators, the employment rate of the 55-59, 60-64, 65-69 and 70-74 age groups is measured, which indicates the participation of older people in the labor market in a given country. The second is the Participation in Society element, which includes indicators such as "Voluntary activities", "Care to children and grandchildren", "Care to infirm and disabled", "Political participation", which also represents a significant proportion. Among the main indicators of Independent, Healthy and Secure Living are the areas of "Physical exercise", "Access to health services", "Independent living", "Financial security", "Physical safety" and "Lifelong learning". The fourth main area is Capacity and Enabling Environment for Active Ageing, where "Remaining life expectancy at age 55", "Share of healthy life expectancy at age 55", "Mental well-being", as well as "Use of ICT", "Social connectedness" and "Educational attainment" come into play.

The Active Ageing Index (AAI) is therefore a measurement tool that can demonstrate the untapped potential of older people in active and healthy ageing, the economic and social potential of ageing in individual countries. It measures the level at which older people live an independent and fulfilling life, the extent to which they participate in the labor market, what social activities they perform, and what skills they have. The AAI therefore, creates a basis of comparison with which the European Union and the countries participating in the quantification can get a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of their strategies related to the ageing society, possible interventions, thus the situation of individual countries becomes comparable. One of the advantages of the AAI is that it primarily emphasizes the potential of ageing, i.e. it tries to analyze the ageing process from its positive side and define the necessary areas of intervention through the indicators.

In fact, all the main indicators of the Active Ageing Index offer higher education institutions a complex opportunity to get involved, both directly and indirectly. Interventions aimed at improving the employment indicators of older people, promoting social participation, as well as supporting independent, safe and healthy old age may be particularly important areas. The composite indicators of the aspects defined in the AAI offer an excellent opportunity for universities to develop and

formulate their programs aimed at supporting active ageing in a purposeful and efficient manner, taking into account local needs and the interests of society as a whole.

### **3.1 The relationship between universities and older generations**

Higher education institutions are key players in the scientific and academic fields; contributing at regional, national and international levels. Universities, as the largest scientific workshops and knowledge centers of a given settlement, area or region, can have a significant impact on their economic and social environment. The mission of universities is to make their decades-long, sometimes centuries-old experience in education and research as widely accessible as possible, and to promote the dissemination and comprehensive utilization of scientific, innovative, cultural, artistic achievements and scientifically sound knowledge. The socialization of academic knowledge can significantly increase the innovation performance of a given region, the living conditions of its residents, and can greatly contribute to the promotion of community well-being and social activities.

In the spirit of social responsibility, universities have recorded, in their fundamental documents, their commitment to the long-term maintenance of the natural and social environment, the promotion of economic and social development, as well as their position on social integration, equal opportunities, health preservation, and the promotion of social activities and well-being. In view of demographic and economic changes, and reflecting on the challenges of social aging, it has become increasingly important for higher education institutions to take into account the experiences of the ageing generation and to satisfy their educational, scientific knowledge acquisition, cultural, artistic and cultural needs in their everyday operations and the creation of their strategic goals.

The latest labor market and infocommunication challenges, such as the involvement of old/new labor sources, the emergence of new professions, work forms and methods, versatile competence development, digitalization, artificial intelligence, create an increasing demand for the development of the skills of older generations, the continuous renewal of knowledge, the long-term preservation of work capacity and the strengthening cooperation among generations. More and more universities have recognized the importance of lifelong learning, social activities, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The transfer of the most modern scientific results, practical and professional knowledge, and cultural values represented by universities can have a beneficial effect on preserving the mental and spiritual health of older generations, developing their economic and social role, public activities, strengthening relations among generations and promoting positive ageing.

Universities' activities related to the elderly can be greatly promoted by the fact that they have significant economic and social connections, have generally accumulated significant relational capital during the decades of their operation, and have a wide network of contacts among former students and members of the alumni community.

Based on all these opportunities, in recent decades, numerous good practices, methodological innovations and forms of knowledge transfer and knowledge dissemination have emerged in higher education institutions in the field of education and training of older generations, and "senior" courses or lectures have become very popular and regular at several universities.

The age-friendly approach, the widespread adoption of active ageing, the continuous development and transfer of professional and methodological results, also sharing of good practices collectively support the justification for Hungarian-language higher education institutions in Hungary and the Carpathian Basin to establish a network of "senior" universities. This initiation also involves the participation of public cultural, public collection institutions, associations, and adult education colleges involved and interested in the value-based transmission of science and culture.

### **3.2 Towards positive and successful ageing**

In recent times, several empirical studies have examined the external and internal conditions, personal and infrastructural needs of experiencing positive ageing.[17] And if we consider ageing as a much more complex phenomenon, then the application of the concept of successful aging, positive ageing, may be increasingly justified, going beyond the mental, physical, or labor market activities of people over 65, opening the way to new paradigms, more complex and multifaceted approaches. All this may include, in addition to maintaining health, physical and labor market activities, life



satisfaction, individual and community life goals, success, the search for meaning, purposefulness, optimism, the predominance of positive emotions, personal development, the acquisition of knowledge and competence, achievement, the subjective and community joy of creation, commitment to “good causes”, resilience, vitality, social acceptance and inclusion, and the development of positive relationships, and an old age lived with dignity.[18]

Due to their extremely complex and comprehensive role, universities are able to contribute significantly not only to the promotion of active ageing, but also to the experience of positive and successful ageing, and to individual and community development. If we consider the issue of active and positive ageing as a complex social phenomenon with a multiplier effect, we recognize that all our efforts we have made and the results we have achieved in this area represent a significant step towards our common social goals, well-being, and the sustainability of our society.

#### **4 The role of universities in supporting active and positive ageing**

In addition to fulfilling their basic tasks of scientific research and education, universities can contribute greatly to supporting active, positive and successful ageing, increasing the indicators of the Active Ageing Index and expanding the economic, social, scientific participation of older generations, as well as a healthier and more complex quality of life. All this largely coincides with the social responsibility and fundamental mission of universities. In many cases, supporting positive ageing can be implemented in addition to and in accordance with the performance of basic tasks, and can often be successfully applied by using existing or untapped resources.

If we look at universities as innovation centers and hubs of intellectual activity, spiritual and cultural values, then the performance of basic tasks can be very well combined and harmonized with the support of a program of positive and successful ageing that affects the whole society. Below, I would like to highlight the main focus areas where we can define university activities, projects and core tasks that can be linked to supporting active and positive ageing.

**Education, training, competence development:** knowledge renewal and competence development in line with labor market needs, age-related characteristics and individual needs:

- promotion of willingness to learn,
- second career projects,
- lifelong learning programs in line with the University's training portfolio,
- development of digital competencies,
- use of the Internet and social media, IT security,
- financial awareness and security.

**Well-being and health preservation:** supporting the preservation of physical and mental health, achieving a happy, satisfied and successful old age:

- actions and projects in order to implement the concept of positive and successful ageing,
- health preservation, disease prevention,
- use of state administration and care systems,
- physical activities in old age,
- preservation of cognitive and mental health,
- mental and physical recreation,
- leisure, relaxation and intellectual activities,
- sustainability, environmental awareness.

**Community involvement:** community organization, intergenerational cooperation and the experience of social utility:

- generations cooperation,
- development of the ALUMNI community,
- development of social competences, avoidance of social isolation,
- mental hygiene,
- promotion of social activity, volunteering, charity,

- fight against ageism, action against negative prejudices and discrimination against older people.

**Citizen science:** increasing common knowledge and exploiting the potential of common knowledge, developing the innovative capacity of society:

- a. access to the University's resources and services for the purpose of knowledge sharing and knowledge generation,
- b. authentic science communication and scientific dissemination – fight against fake- and pseudoscience,
- c. multidisciplinary approach, strengthening scientific and cultural diversity,
- d. creation of the highest innovative capacity achievable through the cooperation of generations,
- e. citizen science – involving the experiences and "slow and deep knowledge" of older people in scientific cooperation in the name of common knowledge,
- f. the possibility of involvement in international cooperation and mobility programs.

In these focus areas, or in their respective segments, many higher education institutions have already launched successful projects and achieved tangible, concrete results. Therefore, it may certainly be worthwhile sharing and aggregating good practices and positive examples by organizing universities into networks, and to create a common knowledge base and competence repository.

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