

# HOW IS AGING ADDRESSED IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## 1. *Introduction*

In the mission statement of the European Network of Aging Studies we can read the following:

One of the greatest challenges that today's societies face is their radical demographic change resulting from the expanding human lifespan. The ever-increasing group of older people prompts a thorough reflection on the ways in which we experience and organize human life, more specifically, on the cultural meanings of the aging process, and the theories and policies on aging.<sup>1</sup>

Sociologists and social work professionals would, in all likelihood, agree with the above mentioned statement except for one adjective, namely radical. We have been facing an increase of the lifespan and a continuous socio-demographic shift in western societies for many decades. It seems that only now that we are facing the consequences of these changes, such as states not being in a position to pay for retirement benefits anymore, are we becoming aware that such changes need to entail actions. The current economic situation forces every one of us to look at aging and old age differently. According to statistics, more than a quarter of Austria's population will be over 65 in 2030.<sup>2</sup> No longer can anyone say "the old" and by doing so categorize them and put them in the group of "other". We will have to look for ways to include elderly people in society in a meaningful way. At the University of Applied Sciences JOANNEUM (FHJ) Graz/Austria we address aging in a very specific way: The department of social work offers a Master program which focuses on "aging and social work with adult and elderly clients".

At the department of social work the term aging is not used to specify a certain age group. In fact, no exact age group can be named as age is an attribution by society on the one hand and by individuals on the other. Taking this postulate into consideration then being elderly is either attributed or attributing and cannot be ascribed to people of a certain age.

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1 <http://www.agingstudies.eu>, retrieved on: April 4, 2012

2 [http://www.statistik.at/web\\_de/dynamic/statistiken/bevoelkerung/067546](http://www.statistik.at/web_de/dynamic/statistiken/bevoelkerung/067546), retrieved on: November 5, 2012

## 2. *General trends*

Education, research and development as well as continuing education at the department of social work are focused on client work as well as organizational, managerial and leadership tasks. While after WW II social work referred mainly to youth welfare work, we are addressing a much wider field and diversified target groups if we talk about modern social work today. Among these professional fields we can find the relatively young field of social work with adult and elderly clients, which has only been internationally recognized about a decade ago.

In the 21st century professional social work is facing a precarious situation. It is characterized by increasing client needs as well as demands made by client families, which goes hand in hand with rising costs. On the other hand the profession has not escaped the current financial crisis: public funding has been drastically reduced in the province of Styria<sup>3</sup>, namely by 25 %, and is not likely to be raised in the near future considering the economic situation. Thus, the means available have to be used responsibly and social agencies are held accountable as to the measures and interventions they set and how they allocate money.<sup>4</sup>

We assume that in postmodern society the trend towards less individual assistance, e.g. through a family network, will continue to persist, which will have to be compensated by increased public and private social services. Taking into account the double mandate under which social work operates, namely accountability towards both the client and the state, a holistic understanding of the situation will be vital.<sup>5</sup>

## 3. *Curriculum for Bachelor and Master studies: Aging*

The work with adult and elderly clients is based on a multitude of professional social fields. Thus, students will have to be trained according to a generalist principle before specializing in training for working with the elderly client. In their studies at FHJ students acquire theoretical, methodological and practical skills that provide a solid basis for their professional careers.

Specific courses offered in the Bachelor program in the form of both lectures and seminars are:

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3 [http://www.steiermark-sozialarbeit.at/index.php?option=com\\_frontpage&Itemid=1](http://www.steiermark-sozialarbeit.at/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1)

4 Löschnigg/Scheipl (1999). "Sozialinitiativen", in: Österreich Sozial. Wien: BMAGS.

5 Rauschenbach T. (1992). Soziale Arbeit in der industriellen Risikogesellschaft. Berlin: Luchterhand.

- Adults and elderly clients (4 ECTS points)<sup>6</sup>
- Chronically and mentally ill clients (4 ECTS points)
- Migrants (4 ECTS points)

Specific courses offered in our Master program which focuses on working with adults and elderly clients are:

- Generations living together (4 ECTS points)
- Gender-specific aspects of aging (3 ECTS points)
- Adults in retirement (3 ECTS points)
- Health, sickness and disability in age (8 ECTS points)
- Social work with the eldest (5 ECTS points)

#### 4. *Philosophy of aging at the department of social work FHJ*

To an extraordinarily high extent aging is influenced by culture and society. Therefore, the concepts of aging are diverse; what some cultures see as "successful aging", which is a term that in itself begs further discussion but will not be examined in more detail in this paper, might be seen in a totally different light by another culture. What can be said about aging and holds a more general truth is that whether a positive development for adults who have to live through transitions in their lives, e.g. from work life to retirement, is possible or not depends greatly on the fact whether a society has a reflected attitude towards living and aging, whether it enables and supports transitional processes that people will unavoidably go through in their lives. Vital questions to be asked are: Do elderly people have "agency" in a society? Do they have access to knowledge and resources? Can they participate according to their own will in a society?

A policy of aging addresses two sides: political regulations and services offered for the elderly on the one hand, and political agency of the elderly themselves on the other. This, in itself, can and will bear a conflict on either side regarding objectives as to securing and strengthening of social integration, especially if it comes to risk distribution. Aging in itself bears risks but there are disproportionately higher risks for those who age in a state of being socially vulnerable. The structural change of aging in postmodern society shows a polarization between positive and negative aging. Thus, social work professionals will have to carefully analyse existing disparities, social disadvantages as well as material and immaterial privileges in order to develop equal opportunities for all ages.

#### 5. *Current trends in aging*

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<sup>6</sup> ECTS = European Credit Transfer System, see: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/ects\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/ects_en.htm), on: 08. Nov. 2012

In our research at FHJ we have identified the following trends<sup>7</sup>:

- increasing life expectancy
- increased population ratio of over 60-year olds
- lack of support in post-professional life
- feminization of aging
- above-average increase of aged migrants
- increasing population ratio of the eldest (over 80)
- increasing numbers of inpatients in care facilities

Hand in hand with the above mentioned trends go the following social risks:

- lack of social networks (dissolving of traditional family structures)
- social isolation and disintegration
- dire financial situation and poverty
- need for social assistance
- high risk of illness
- (early) disability
- lack of perspectives
- scarcity of old-age provision for "non-normal" biographies

Furthermore, taking into account the eldest in our society, i.e. people who reach the age of 80 and above, another set of risks needs to be taken into consideration:

- isolation
- chronic illness
- multi-morbidity
- dementia
- increased need for specific care
- dependency on assistance

The eldest of our society deserve particular attention in regards to solidarity and the current socio-political discussion seeing that the population ratio of this group accounts for 18.8 million today and will rise to 34.7 million by 2030.<sup>8</sup>

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7 Loidl/Posch (2005). "Sozialarbeit mit alten Menschen: ein junges Berufsfeld." in: Strategien gegen soziale Ausgrenzung alter Menschen. Graz: Druckhaus Thalerhof. 153-161.

8 EU Commission Green Paper "Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations", [http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/social\\_situation/green\\_paper\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_situation/green_paper_en.html), retrieved on: 13 November 2012

A major focus and objective must be to ensure the quality of life of the elderly so as to offer an alternative to merely medicating them. As the quality of life depends to a great extent on material resources, social work tries to develop and put into practice suitable, milieu-specific concepts to make the aforementioned concept of agency possible for the aged.

Apart from medical assistance and care, the following issues are increasingly important for the eldest and frail of our society:

- financial assistance
- material substance (e.g. savings, property)
- contacts, networks, cooperation
- learning facilities
- participation
- space for creativity and recuperation
- support through family and neighbourhood

What will remain and increasingly become a challenge for the social work profession is to satisfy client needs on the one hand and do justice to the providers of financial funding on the other, regardless whether funding comes from private or public sources. SROI, the social return of investment, has found its way into the language of social services. Times of limitless spending have been replaced by responsible monetary allocation and careful planning of suitable services.

## 6. *Future trends*

Social work with adult and elderly clients is a field that works closely together with other professions; interdisciplinary work has gradually become more important. Not only does social work cooperate closely with care and health professions, which are related fields, but also with e.g. information technology. Furthermore, on a non-professional level, a generation mix and a normalization of aging will have to take place, i.e. the dialogue between generations has to be encouraged and the awareness needs to be raised that no one escapes the aging process and will thus, in a few decades, belong to the elderly themselves.

We are hoping that social work can facilitate and further the following processes:

- individualization of services in both inpatient and outpatient facilities
- good and efficient coordination of referrals, psychosocial counselling, case management and family assistance
- increased offers of functional, reliable technologies
- suitable educational and cultural offers
- promotion of self-help groups

- support in self-determined and independent actions
- preservation of skills and empowerment
- assistance in planning and directing charity work
- assistance in goal development
- nurture of learned helpfulness
- political change
- community participation

## 7. *Conclusion*

It has been made clear in this paper that aging cannot be reduced to biographical aging only. Cultural factors and background, individual biographies, the existence of material and immaterial resources, or the lack thereof, play decisive factors as to how well one can age and to what extent agency and, thus continuous participation in society, can take place. The complexity of client needs requires tailor-made solutions, which is hard to realize in a world that battles a global financial crisis. Careful planning of measures to assist aging, skilled education of professionals and an efficient collaboration among these, an open and productive dialogue between service providers and policy makers, and finally but no less important general awareness that aging concerns all need to be fostered.

## Literature cited

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