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Report

WELLBEING AND AGEING: THE LIFELONG LEARNING APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION BY MEPS



MEP SIRPA PIETIKAINEN, CHAIR OF THE LIFELONG LEARNING INTEREST GROUP

MEP Sirpa Pietikäinen, Chair of the Lifelong Learning Interest Group of the European Parliament, opened the conference by stating that in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, **the value of lifelong learning and intergenerational learning has received a renewed significance**. Both offer a key policy tool for imagining a post-covid socio-landscape whereby learning and learning to learn is positioned as a central mode for a fair and sustainable recovery.

The notion of prosperity needs to run parallel with sustainability; not in anathema to it. Here, it is important to challenge the conception of prosperity as conducive to a high-consumer society. This needs to be deconstructed and replaced with an alternative conception of prosperity - and learning can play an important role to provide people with the tools for imagining a mode of living that dovetails with inhabiting the planet in a sustainable fashion.

The idea of compartmentalising learning in a specific point in one's life was also challenged. The value of intergenerational learning broadens the

scope for intergenerational exchange - and can offer a point of discussion across both age and experience.

MEP Dace Melbarde, ViceChair of the Interest Group, provided an additional standpoint. She said that education and lifelong learning offer people the capacity to build resilience in light of the Covid crisis. Not only do accessible learning opportunities for older groups stimulate a sense of meaning and create the grounds for social contact; they also enable people to navigate unpredictable times.

It is crucial that learning is conceived within a **rights-based approach** - that is equally applicable to both young and old. The lifelong learning approach needs to be implemented across EU policies.

In terms of digital education, the lifelong learning approach receives an added urgency. Member States have been called to include the lifelong learning approach in their post-Covid recovery plans. Bridging the age-gradient that exists in terms of media and digital literacy is of paramount importance if we are to steer clear of creating a two-tier Europe whereby older groups are excluded from participating in society based on lack of digital and media literacy.



MEP DACE MELBARDE, VICECHAIR OF THE LIFELONG LEARNING INTEREST GROUP

Initiated by the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) and by the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLL) together with a number of MEPs, the European Parliament's Interest Group on Lifelong Learning brings together civil society representatives and MEPs to discuss key issues connected to lifelong learning with strong emphasis on adult education.

An important reason to form the Interest Group on Lifelong Learning was the new Juncker's European Commission and its priorities. We stand for a comprehensive and trans-sectorial lifelong learning approach, and want to stress that education is not only about employment, but is linked to personal development, social inclusion, active citizenship, and much more. These topics represent an even greater transformative point, on the account of the digital and green transitions of the von der Leyen Commission.

The interest group works as a "watchdog" to what the European Union is doing on lifelong learning, and builds on its transversal composition to foster lifelong learning policies in Europe.

CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVES

Gina Ebnar, Secretary-General of the European Association for the Education of Adults, introduced the topic for the meeting: ageing and wellbeing. **The benefits of learning in later life are multi-dimensional and inter-related.** Providing adequate and accessible learning opportunities to older adults can tackle many of the social issues faced by such groups in contemporary society such as social isolation and marginalisation. Through learning, participants can establish social contacts and express their capacity to learn.

The European Agenda for Adult Learning focuses on older learners. **Data suggests that older learners are least represented in learning environments** - and receive the least investment in their learning across the EU. The question needs to be asked why large swathes of the population are cast aside on account of their age. The capacity, and willingness to learn does not cease at a particular age and neither should investment and subsequent opportunities to engage in meaningful learning environments.

Intergenerational learning environments are, as it stands, limited in provision and choice. In addition, they are not positioned in mainstream format, and do not tend to be sensitive to the diversity that exists across older learners in terms of varying learning abilities, relationship to employment, health status and social background.



**PHILIPPE SEIDEL,
AGE PLATFORM**

Philippe Seidel, AGE Platform, pointed out that, on average, **42% of Europeans feel discrimination based on age** to a strong degree across EU countries. This finding provides a stark depiction of how ageing is understood at both an institutional and societal level. The result of such a conception of ageing is that **age-inclusive learning environments tend to be few and far between.** At the level of social policy, in general, many tools lack imagination when it comes to ageing - often reinforcing a limited view of ageing that is overly passive in orientation.

The number of those engaged in learning environments above 65 is significantly lower than other groups. This is partly down to a lack of understanding and action taken to provide age-inclusive learning environments where the needs of such learners are catered for. The question needs to be addressed: what barriers are faced by older persons in accessing learning and what policy tools are necessary to

ensure these barriers are mitigated?

One such barrier revolves around **digital learning.** There is a clear lack of accessibility standards for older learners. This is often amplified by geography - whereby older rural groups are cut off from the ability to access wi-fi.

A broader understanding of learning is needed to create more age-inclusive learning environments. Learning needs to be positioned as a process that occurs throughout life - opportunities to learn need to follow this narrative. The outdated path of: learning, employment and retiring is no longer



**DINA SOEIRO, INSTITUTO
POLITÉCNICO DE COIMBRA**

viable in contemporary society. **Validated and certified education after retirement is a necessary step** to ensure that older groups are beneficiaries of education and no longer excluded.

Dina Soeiro, from the Instituto Politécnico de Coimbra, picked up the question: is it fair that age is a criteria to assess education and training? She introduced a project aiming to foster intergenerational learning opportunities, so to counter this narrative. The value of such learning is mutually beneficial for both young and older groups alike. In this regard it can be understood as an exchange in which normative learning environments do not provide.

Within the project, music is used for building **literacy skills.** The project is based on the pedagogy of Paulo Freire - the educational method is non-hierarchical; it is horizontal in this sense; not about transferring information but raising cognition/awareness and a person's capacity to act. They have a decentralized structure; and are heavily community

orientated. The project has successfully nurtured the development of literacy and or digital skills; well-being, as well as active citizenship.

They notice the need to re-configure education beyond a means to achieve labour market participation; to transcend the idea of education or learning as something to be done in a narrow window of one's life - investment needs to be targeted at arenas where adult learning can be realised - learning does not stop after school - neither should investment.

The idea that intergenerational learning is a bi-directional benefit was picked up by Shanti George and Camee Comperen as well. It is important to notice that **lifelong learning and lifelong wellbeing are inextricably intertwined.** The opportunity to engage with lifelong learning stimulates well-being through a number of avenues: social contact, personal fulfillment and expression.

Intergenerational learning is means from which a more socially-cohesive society can be realised. **Intergenerational partnerships can create stronger communities,** more age-sensitive policies, and provide an arena for transformative learning from which new perspectives can be forged. The issue of ageism consolidates a narrow conception of ageing whereby older people are excluded from meaningful participation in many arenas of life. This is often exacerbated by institutional policies (EU, OECD, UN etc).

The pandemic has brought to the surface issues such as polarisation between age groups. Engaging in cross-generational dialogue through intergenerational learning is thus



**CAMEE COMPEREN AND SHANTI
GEORGE, LEARNING FOR WELL-BEING
FOUNDATION**

imperative to fostering partnership and ameliorating division. Learning environments need to be discussion focused and dialogue stimulating in orientation. The premise for such learning is sharing experiences and forming new perspectives that aim to re-configure how age is understood. Imagine oldest and youngest - what would they say if you ask 'what would be the first thing you would change in the world'?

CLOSING WORDS

Brikena Xhomaqi, Director of the Lifelong Learning Platform, thanked all participants and summarised the discussion. She said that **the focus on education needs to transcend an instrumental approach**; At an EU level this is often realised in a narrative that is short-sighted - viewing education as an employment tool. Raises the question: why do we compartmentalise learning according to a rigid age metric that is not rooted in our daily lives; this needs to be questioned and we need to continue to raise awareness around the benefits of intergenerational learning. **Lifelong learning entitlements are needed** to entice adult-learning - to provide people with the security to engage with learning at any point in their life.



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