



Position Paper on the European Year 2012 on Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations

The 'European Forum for Freedom in Education' (*effe*) is an NGO in the area of compulsory education. We see our organisation as a forum in which current issues concerning education in Europe can be discussed. Our members are interested and active citizens from the educational sector; that includes teachers, schools, school-organisations, administrators and those involved in university life. All members of *effe* stand for the right to education and for the promotion of diversity and freedom in education.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) understands 'Active Ageing' as the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and security with a view to enhance the quality of life as people age. This process allows individuals and groups of the population at large *'to realise their potential of physical, social, and mental well-being'* throughout the course of their lives and to actively participate in society.¹

As interdependence and intergenerational solidarity are important tenets of the 'Active Ageing' process, the essential feature of the concept is that elderly citizens play an **active role in society**.² Maintaining autonomy and independence of the elderly requires the recognition of a healthy life style, their **involvement in society and family as well as other supportive environments as key ingredients of Active Ageing**.³ To this end, WHO Director General Brundland stated over a decade ago that *'policies that reduce social inequalities and poverty are essential to complement individual efforts towards Active Ageing'*.⁴

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¹ World Health Organisation (WHO), *Ageing and Life course* (2011); Available via: http://www.who.int/ageing/active_ageing/en/index.html.

² European Commission (EC) Directorate General (DG) for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, *Features: Meeting the challenge of an ageing Europe*, 6th July 2011; Available via: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=370&langId=en&featuresId=133&furtherFeatures=yes>.

³ World Health Day 1999 Information material, *In a society for all ages: Active Ageing makes the difference*; Available via: http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/alc_embrace2001_en.pdf.

⁴ Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director General of the WHO, as quoted from the World Health Day 1999 Information material, *In a society for all ages: Active Ageing makes the difference* (note 3).



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Demographic challenges

In the European Union (EU) ageing societies require a coherent Active Ageing strategy to provide solutions to this demographic trend:⁵ the average age of European citizens is estimated to be 47.9 years by 2060.⁶ The **socio-economic implications for Active Ageing are diverse**, for example, a heightened risk of poverty for the elderly, growing social polarisation and exclusion and a decrease in the working-age population.⁷

Addressing these demographic challenges across Europe demands **sustainable strategies** which take into account issues such as the pressure on public budgets, pension systems, and the health care sector. As taking *'no action would weaken the EU's ability to meet the future needs of an ageing population'*,⁸ we must formulate and implement policies now which enable Active Ageing in accordance with the comprehensive approach to active participation and well-being.

effe welcomes therefore the ambition of enhancing the opportunities of older people through dedicating the European Year 2012 to 'Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations'.⁹

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⁵ Europa Press Release, *Third Demography Report: population is becoming older and more diverse*, MEMO/11/209, 1st April 2011; Available via:

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/11/209&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>.

⁶ European Demography Report 2010, §1.2 *An ageing population structure*, p.2; Available via:

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/documents/Tab/report.pdf>.

⁷ EC, Directorate General for Regional Policy, *Regions 2020 – Demographic Challenges for European Regions*, Background Document to Commission Staff Working Document Sec(2008)2868 Final, November 2008, p.19-20; Available via:

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/working/regions2020/pdf/regions2020_demographic.pdf;

⁸ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *Dealing with the impact of an ageing population in the EU (2009 Ageing Report)*, COM(2009)180 final, 29th April 2009, p.3;

Available via: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2009:0180:FIN:EN:PDF>.

⁹ For the proposal of the European Year on Active Ageing 2012, see: EC, *Proposal for a Decision on the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Year for Active Ageing (2012)*, Document COM(2010)462 final, 6th September 2010; Available via:

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/com/com_com%282010%290462_/com_com%282010%290462_en.pdf. For more information, consult the EC DG on Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion website at <http://ec.europa.eu/social/ey2012.jsp>.

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Key contexts of the European Year 2012

In view of *effe's* **holistic approach to social participation, innovative education and the respect and promotion of fundamental values such as freedom and non-discrimination**, we clearly support the main objectives of this thematic focus, i.e. the encouragement of cross-generational cooperation and commitment frameworks, the elimination of age-related stereotypes, and the raising of awareness of the value of active ageing to society at large.¹⁰ Above all, **Active Ageing and solidarity between generations** need to be contextualised within the relevant social contexts of mutual understanding and flexible networks of exchange.

Supporting the role of the elderly in family life and society demands their inclusion in many different areas, from the employment, health care and transportation needs of the elderly, or the necessary social services and housing requirements. What these areas have in common is not only the need to adjust to the specific demands of older generations, but also the **necessity to enhance private and public structures so as to allow for active participation and societal inclusion of all citizens**.

Importantly, such sectoral re-orientation towards fostering viable active citizenship can only be realised in harmony with the needs of both the current generations and the generations to come. Only through a thorough **understanding of the diverse needs of the various generations** can we effectively shape the political and social agenda across Europe in order to allow for Active Ageing.

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The positive impact of education on health

With **regards to well-being and health aspects** required for a viable Active Ageing strategy, evidence, which reveals a **strong positive correlation between education and health**, is '*large, consistent, and persuasive*'.¹¹ That is to say, positive effects of education on health are both directly and indirectly connected. Indirect effects are brought about by enhancing the social and psychological capacities of individuals, by

¹⁰ EC DG Education and Culture (EAC), Cultural Contact Point (CCP); Available via: <http://www.ccp.ie/index.jsp?p=106&n=461&a=295> .

¹¹ David M. & Barbara J. Low, Phuong T. Huynh, *Can Education Policy Be Health Policy? Implications of Research on the Social Determinants of Health*, in: Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law, Duke University Press Volume 30, Issue 6 (2005), p.1137.



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equipping individuals to lead healthy life-styles and adopt healthy behaviour, and by ultimately positively influencing their work and economic conditions.¹²

Not only is education the strongest determinant of health,¹³ but it also promotes pro-poor growth policies; **social and cognitive education leads to enhanced processes of social innovation and sustainable economic development.**¹⁴ In this regard, 'education affects far more than an individual's employability and economic prospects'.¹⁵ For that purposes, **inter-generational education environments which reach both young and old citizens are the condition for sustainable social inclusion and empowerment of the elderly.**

Therefore, **inclusive strategies** on inter-generational solidarity as well as Active Ageing can only be pursued in **flexible environments** which re-engage marginalised sections of society in their daily professional and private lives. The **main tool to empower excluded people such as the elderly in a sustainable manner is the acquisition of competences, knowledge sharing and understanding – in short: education.**

The role of Lifelong Learning in Active Ageing

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For *effe*, education always refers to the holistic dimension of child education and Lifelong Learning (LLL), i.e. non-formal and informal learning (NFIL) frameworks complementary to formal education systems. Such a comprehensive approach to education offers all generations the opportunity to re-engage in society, increasing their potential for well-being and societal participation according to individual capabilities, needs and desires.¹⁶ It follows therefore that **LLL is the key means for inter-generational exchange as well as social dialogue and participation across all generations.**

¹² David M. & Barbara J. Low, Phuong T. Huynh (2005), p.1139.

¹³ As quoted from David M. & Barbara J. Low, Phuong T. Huynh (2005), p.1139 with reference to Marilyn Winkleby et al, *Socioeconomic Status and Health: How Education, Income, and Occupation Contribute to Risk Factors for Cardio-vascular Disease*, in: American Journal of Public Health, Volume 82 (1992), p.816–820.

¹⁴ David M. & Barbara J. Low, Phuong T. Huynh (2005), p.1147 with reference to D.P. Keating, and C. Hertzman, *Developmental Health and the Wealth of Nations*, New York: Guilford (1999).

¹⁵ David M. & Barbara J. Low, Phuong T. Huynh (2005), p.1147.

¹⁶ For more information on the holistic approach to education advocated and represented by *effe*, see e.g. the *effe* Response to the 'Consultation on the promotion and valorisation of non-formal and informal learning', 8th February 2011; Available via: http://effe-eu.org/images/Publications/nfil_consultation.pdf.

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Lifelong policies need to live up to their promise: *Lifelong* means *throughout the course of life*.¹⁷ Thus, **comprehensive LLL strategies demand an individual-centred and integrated approach to education, health and family support at all ages.**

With a view to fostering inter-generational understanding, only a holistic approach to education environments allows for interesting, inspiring, and individualised dialogues. It is the combination of NFIL and formal education which provides the flexible provision for the first dialogues between young and old citizens to take place. **Schools are the perfect environments in which we can foster sustainable social inclusion early on, as they are able to combine formal and NFIL education elements,** for instance in the form of volunteering activities.

In short, it is **the sharing of knowledge and experience from the early years onwards that forms the basis for inter-generational solidarity.**

Addressing the demographic challenges through education

The **education of young and elderly citizens is the main tool for attaining the objectives of the EU Year 2012.** A holistic approach to education provides the fertile grounds to encourage cross-generational cooperation and commitments, to stimulate social inclusion and to raise awareness of LLL through the exchange of knowledge and dialogue in order to enable healthy and Active Ageing processes with equal opportunities and mutual understanding.

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effe therefore wishes to underline the **indispensable role of school environments for cultivating the necessary dialogue and exchange** of experiences and skills between old and young citizens. Sustainably addressing the socio-economic implications of the demographic change in Europe means planting the seed of understanding and realising Active Ageing processes and LLL from early childhood onwards.

In concrete terms, this includes the following key deliverable benefits of schools:

¹⁷ For more information, consult e.g. *Council Conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET2020')*, Document 2009/C 119/02, 28th May 2009, p.3;
Available via: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:119:0002:0010:en:PDF> .

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1) Social inclusion and understanding of Active Ageing

Firstly, **the challenge of increasing social polarisation and exclusion can be overcome by helping children to understand the needs of elderly people.** This means encouraging children's understanding of the (potential) role and value of older generations for long-lasting economic growth and social networks through LLL; in essence, **making known the benefits of active participation in society across all ages.** Fostering an understanding of Active Ageing and the respective policies is crucial to make children and young people appreciate that they themselves will eventually belong to older generations in society and become the beneficiaries of the policies they are shaping today.

To that end, schools can be easily transformed into platforms of cooperation for inter-generational solidarity-building activities which allow both young and old citizens to gain hands-on experience in Active Ageing processes. Here, NFIL learning frameworks are complementary tools which enable flexible, individualised education environments for the sake of **eliminating age-related stereotypes and fostering social inclusion in all dimensions.**

2) Active citizenship and intergenerational dialogue

Secondly, **the increased susceptibility of the elderly to poverty and the subsequent implications to their health can be sustainably remedied by including younger generations in the development of LLL and Active Ageing strategies, and vice versa.** Patterns of socio-economic marginalisation and discrimination of older individuals as well as whole groups of society should be tackled in school environments by **involving children in shaping approaches and answers to the well-being and active citizenship of older citizens.**

This demands the twofold contribution of children in determining (in theory) and realising (in practice) the potential of physical, social and mental well-being of elderly citizens now and in the future, complementing individual efforts of Active Ageing and LLL. For this means, **schools are able to serve as platforms for cooperation and dialogue amongst current and future generations.**



3) Societal innovation and smart employability strategies

Thirdly, **schools can provide the principal arena for LLL to develop, exchange and implement innovations for addressing the economic issues presented by a diminishing working-age population** across Europe by **stimulating social and cognitive competences at all ages**. Corresponding challenges for the labour market, coupled with shifting needs of the health care, transportation and housing sectors need to be addressed at all levels including the primary and secondary education sector. Accordingly, **LLL strategies should build on Active Ageing policies in conjunction with inclusive and creative education and training frameworks**, in particular at social level (e.g. family, community) and in professional contexts (e.g. employment, volunteering activities).

This is particularly important in terms of the recognition and validation of NFIL, as it allows for the flourishing of a flexible labour market. Valuable personal and professional assets gained in non-formal or informal settings should not be ignored, but acknowledged as enormous potential and driver for an inclusive, flexible and sustainable labour market. In order to strengthen Europe's position in the global community through effective Active Ageing policies, **it is essential that skills are internationally transferable and recognised**.

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Concluding remarks

Ultimately, for **inter-generational solidarity** to become a viable reality for all, action needs to be taken in the early years of an individual's development in order to pave the way for a lifelong healthy and fulfilling personal and professional development. A prerequisite for sustainable Active Aging and solidarity across generations is a holistic approach. *effe* therefore wants to point out the absolute and equal importance of **encouraging the active participation and well-being of older generations in society** on one hand, and **nurturing the involvement and understanding of children in this matter** on the other.

For the given reasons, we believe that **schools are a crucial platform for shaping an early understanding of the importance of LLL and social inclusion through active citizenship**. They have great potential to stimulate inter-generational dialogue through mutual learning and cross-generational education exchanges.



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Therefore, **school education as advocated by *effe* is the starting point for Active Ageing and solidarity across generations, and should be prioritised and strengthened as such.**

We must not hesitate to address the challenges of demographic change now, for the sake of the well-being and active participation of current and future generations.

Signed by,

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