

Grandads go to school

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Modern industrial societies are very efficient, but the very high level of productivity reached on an economic level has its drawbacks on a sociological level. Selectivity is merciless and quickly puts a great number of people out of the economic circuit. With those who are out of the running from the age of 45 and those who are in retirement after 60, that makes 20 million people in France.

Society is ferocious. In order to make room for ambitious young wolves, all kinds of arguments are used: one is "old" younger and younger. The cause is obvious: "Performance decreases with age. It is inexorable. An executive of 48 is finished. There is no room in professional life for the over 50s."

Obviously, the people concerned feel gloomy. It is not a matter of money. They have the income from their retirement but they no longer feel any good for anything. What is their future? What will become of them? This questioning is all the more worrying as life expectancy is increasing and they thus easily have 30 years of life ahead of them. Will they get square eyes in front of their TV sets, spend their time playing cards or sink into boredom or even depression as is often the case?

A few years ago, one man had the merit of completely reversing this trend and asserting that, thanks to a "second career one could lead a very successful third life" and make it into a new adventure. This man is Professor Pierre Vellas from the University of Toulouse, who was the first person in the world to think of creating a university for senior citizens.

For that, he based himself on a simple idea, summed up by a Japanese proverb: "One begins to age when one stops learning." From this idea, Pierre Vellas decided to put old people back into the university circuit. He was thus going in the opposite direction to pre-conceived ideas according to which the intellectual faculties become inevitably exhausted with age. With him, it is quite the opposite: ageing is the consequence and not the cause of the defect in intellectual activity. "Age should no longer mean social death and decrepitude, but the beginning of a new fulfilment," Pierre Vellas declares.

The first university for senior citizens was thus opened in this frame of mind, in 1973. It was immediately highly successful not only in France, where there are now 40 of them, but in the whole world where there are now more than 110.

The university is open to everybody from the age of 50. There is no particular pedagogy. Old people are students just

like any others. Moreover, they find themselves among "young" students and can sometimes meet their grandchildren in the corridors. There are no diplomas, but it is true that the teaching is different from the traditional scholarly model with theory and main lectures. Here, the model is "convivial" and is based on the very strong motivation of the desire to learn.

The syllabuses are varied: learning a modern language or science, lectures and discussions, music or art workshops, lessons in the modern world: rock, jazz or contemporary art.

The students at these universities come from very varied social backgrounds. The most highly represented socio-professional categories are teachers, office workers and middle management, but there are also former factory workers, tradesmen and shopkeepers.

Those who had a long education previously are obviously at an advantage. It is harder for those whose education was lighter or who were cut off from the habit of intellectual work by a repetitive job.

In any case, they all find the idea of going back to studying after 40 years away, a little stressful. But, whatever the level, competition and self-esteem come into play and enable the new students to plunge into the big fountain of youth of knowledge.

And they appreciate its effects: "I have found my memory again," says one of them. "Before this, I had reached the stage of no longer writing or

thinking. Now, it has become easy again," says another.

The University of Toulouse has brought a new art of ageing by learning, that is to say by having fun. It proves that the activity of the mind is capital in the dynamics of life at whatever age. In the case of old people, this activity of the mind, encouraged by the universities for senior citizens, also has the enormous advantage of giving them a developed social life which saves them from the great evil of old age, loneliness, while maintaining their faculties of adaptation.

At any rate, universities for senior citizens today appear as a major, avant-garde innovation. Indeed, in the modern world, everything turns on the obsolescence of knowledge. Owing to the geometrical progress of discoveries, what one learnt at university is quickly out of date.

If there is a huge gap for the grandmother born with the century who saw the world move from the candle and the horse to electronics and the conquest of space, it is no less great, with the acceleration of knowledge, for a young 35-year-old executive. What he learnt at university 10 years earlier is already outdated. What will it be like for him, ten years from now?

The fight against the obsolescence of knowledge will be one of the challenges of the future. If today there are universities for senior citizens, the year 2,000 will, no doubt, see the birth of continuing universities.

JU. 166