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International Perspectives on Older Adult Education

Research, Policies and Practice

Chapter 35

South Africa

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Prior to the advent of full democracy in 1994, South Africa had little by way of adult education provision, particularly for members of the majority of the population who were not considered citizens, senior or otherwise. It might be expected that after the election of Nelson Mandela as President the situation changed for the better, but, on the whole, advances in adult education have been somewhat sporadic (Aitchison 2003a, b, 2004; Baatjes and Mathe 2004; Rule 2006) and only in the last 10 years have we seen much specific attention paid to the older citizen.

This chapter begins by providing a brief historical overview of education policy developments in South Africa related to older adults and then presents two case studies. It seemed appropriate to examine two contemporary initiatives that cater for older adults at different ends of the education spectrum, rather than just one, because educational inequalities are still deeply rooted in South Africa and the educational experiences of older adults vary accordingly. Therefore, we focus on the Kha Ri Gude mass literacy campaign and the University of the Third Age. We go on to tease out some of the key issues that are pertinent to the education of older adults in South Africa: access, articulation and target group coverage.

35.1 Historical Background

In the twentieth century, subsequent to the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910 and the gradual entrenching of a racist and segregationist system that took final form in the apartheid state from 1948 to 1994, education for older people could be found mainly in religious form and in a more limited way in various

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non-formal educational and cultural activities largely directed to well-educated upper-middle class whites. University extra-mural classes based on the British model were first run in 1889 in Cape Town and other initiatives were organised by the National Council of Women (established in 1933) and particularly, the South African Women's Agricultural Union (established in 1931). The University of Cape Town's extra-mural activities considerably pre-date that of the other South African universities which instituted such programmes in the 1970s and 1980s, notably the universities of Natal, the Witwatersrand and the Western Cape.

By the end of the 1960s the apartheid state had severely circumscribed all sites of independent "open to all" adult education practice except those provided by the "liberal" universities which, through their defence of their academic freedom, still held the potential for limited adult education work (Mackie 1995). Their programmes were initially a mix of liberal extra-mural courses and those focused more directly on discussion of current political and social issues. The attendees tended to be older, university educated, white people though these courses were in principle open to all. (In the 1980s and 1990s these university extra-mural programmes expanded into dynamic and often politically engaged departments or centres of adult education involved in community outreach and which later took on responsibility for teaching adult educators. They also exercised considerable influence on post-apartheid adult basic education policy development).

The more immediate origins of formal adult education in South Africa for less well educated black people began with the development of night schools. Although this is often referred to as "the night school movement", it comprised sporadic initiatives which began in the early 1920s and eventually grew into the beginnings of a system in the 1940s. This incipient system of provision was destroyed by the apartheid government in the late 1950s (until partially reinstated in the late 1970s). It must be noted, however, that people enrolled in night schools usually saw their studies as a route to employment or better employment. This focus on employment-related skills became even more dominant when, post 1994, a new Adult Basic Education and Training system was built on what there was of the old state night school system (Aitchison 2003a).

35.2 Adult Education Under the New Democracy

Chapter Two of the new South African constitution of 1996 contains a Bill of Rights whose Section 29 states that:

Everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education; and to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible.

The Section also states that:

Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. In

order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account equity; practicability; and the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices.

These important statements are notable in not making any exception on the grounds of age.

The new Adult Basic Education and Training policies post-1995 were very work-orientated and adopted a competency and standards-based approach with little attraction or usefulness for older people. This reflected a wider global trend, informed by neoliberal capitalism, towards instrumental, market-oriented forms of adult education (Baatjes 2003; Arno et al. 2013). In addition, the state Public Adult Learning Centres (the old state night schools run in school classrooms after hours) were generally attended by youth rewriting the Grade 12 examinations they had failed at school and were an unattractive venue for older people.

35.3 The Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign

A change came, at least for non-literate or semi-illiterate people, with the Kha Ri Gude (“Let us learn”) mass literacy campaign that started in 2008. After a somewhat abortive literacy campaign in 2001, a Ministerial Task Team on Literacy developed a detailed proposal for a large scale campaign to reach some 4.7 million people. Their report had a very interesting set of remarks about the need to serve older people as well (Ministerial Committee on Literacy 2006, p. 17):

There may also be arguments about investing resources in another group: the 1.4 million who are over the age of 64. However, it should be remembered that the elderly in South Africa play a significant role in childcare and it is important that they help provide a pro-literacy environment to the young.

As with most South African adult education policies since 1994, even this discourse about education for older people was mainly about education and skills considered economically or socially valuable rather than what had value mainly for personal, cultural or leisure use.

The final literacy campaign target calculations included people up to the age of 74 though the priority age groups were the 15–19 and 25–54. The demographic information used came from the national census of 2001 which had these figures for poorly educated older people (Ministerial Committee on Literacy 2006, p. 141) (Table 35.1).

In the period 2008–2013 the state funded national Kha Ri Gude literacy campaign registered 3, 590, 942 adult learners (of whom about 90 % completed the 6 month course). Each year about 40, 000 voluntary educators ran the classes (and received a small stipend).

Table 35.1 Age group by highest education level

Age group by highest educational level: Census 2001									
Age group	No schooling	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grand Total	
15–19	153,083	24,792	32,707	67,749	124,234	207,395	339,621	949,581	
20–24	286,269	15,329	23,400	44,337	69,838	91,392	127,341	657,906	
25–29	344,698	18,718	28,820	54,530	81,012	101,035	134,149	762,962	
30–34	364,652	19,402	32,408	63,381	94,231	113,237	147,950	835,261	
35–39	452,369	24,598	41,250	79,548	115,115	130,697	167,971	1,011,548	
40–44	476,930	26,290	43,532	82,160	114,178	121,675	153,952	1,018,717	
45–49	460,994	25,832	40,892	75,706	102,808	102,217	126,489	934,938	
50–54	428,744	21,453	33,984	61,869	80,796	78,127	96,743	801,716	
55–59	344,303	16,922	25,494	43,546	56,288	54,985	68,446	609,984	
60–64	394,010	15,957	23,095	38,102	46,065	44,571	53,146	614,946	
65–69	320,218	11,831	16,531	26,811	32,119	30,757	36,689	474,956	
70–74	296,664	9396	13,019	19,488	22,799	21,207	24,880	407,453	
75–79	164,741	5403	7108	10,772	12,846	11,519	14,159	226,548	
80–84	147,447	4180	4967	7133	8161	7023	8452	187,363	
85 +	85,464	2260	2741	3767	4280	3747	4702	106,961	
Totals	4,720,587	242,363	369,948	678,899	964,771	1,119,583	1,504,689	9,600,840	

Source: Statistics South Africa (2003)

Table 35.2 Kha Ri Gude literacy campaign: older learners: 2008–2011

Kha Ri Gude literacy campaign: older learners: 2008, 2009 and 2011					
Year	Total	Older learners	60–69	70–79	80+
2008	357,195		(16 %)	(10 %)	
2009	648,423	152,306 (23 %)	97,599 (15 %)	52,674 (8 %)	2033 (0.3 %)
2011	660,924	137,841 (21 %)	86,473 (13 %)	48,636 (7 %)	2732 (0.4 %)

Source: [Kha Ri Gude unit](#) documents

The statistics on the number of older people who participated in the Kha Ri Gude Literacy Campaign classes indicate that slightly over 20 % were categorised as “older learners” in the years 2008–2011 (Table 35.2):

The Kha Ri Gude campaign was designed to improve cognitive ability through its development of reading, writing and numeracy skills, activities that are known to positively influence memory and reasoning among older people (United States Department of Health and Human Services 2004). An interesting outcome was that there was no significant difference in the results of older learners on the portfolio of assessment exercises completed by all the learners.

Other findings, drawn from reports from campaign monitors on their visits to classes, were that older people found the literacy classes stimulating and engaging. The following are typical evaluation responses taken from older learners:

- *Joining a class is interesting.*
- *It is nice to meet other people in the class.*
- *I no longer feel depressed.*
- *I can handle my own pension.*
- *I feel better about myself and am more confident.*
- *I can help my grandchildren with their homework.*
- *I am able to read the Bible for the first time in my life.*
- *I am able to sign my name.*
- *I am not cheated by my grandchildren who have to draw my money from the ATM.*
- *I need to know how to read because I am looking after my grandchildren who are orphaned.*

The attention given to older learners is particularly striking in respect of the disabled (blind, deaf, physically handicapped and mentally challenged). The campaign made special provision to meet the needs of adults with disabilities (many of whom were older) by, for example, developing Braille materials and training Braille facilitators to include the visually impaired (Fig. 35.1, Table 35.3).

Also of note is that more than 2 % of the volunteer educators were above the age of 60.

This literacy campaign received support from the South African Council for the Aged which was founded in 1956 and now, renamed as “Age-in-Action”, has over 800 NGOs as members who provide various services to older people. Amongst its aims are “to provide empowerment programmes for vulnerable and needy older



Fig. 35.1 Older adult learning in Kha Ri Gude campaign. (Source: John Aitchison: Photograph taken at a Kha Ri Gude class in the Shoshanguve district on 11 June 2008 with permission of the participants)

Table 35.3 Kha Ri Gude literacy campaign: disabled learners: 2008–2010

Year	Total disabled	Older disabled	60–69	70–79	80+
2008	27,120	10,882 (40 %)	5553 (20 %)	3414 (13 %)	1915 (7 %)
2009	72,620	20,790 (29 %)	12,253 (17 %)	8086 (11 %)	451 (1 %)
2010	28,858	9414 (33 %)	5510 (19 %)	3694 (13 %)	210 (1 %)

Source: [Kha Ri Gude unit](#) documents

persons visa viz., adult education” and “to initiate prevention and educational programmes on HIV/AIDS for older persons” (Age-in-Action 2013, p. 1). It helps equip service centres and luncheon clubs running basic adult education programmes with a basic library kit to be used by members of the community.

Since 1981 the organisation has advocated for a model for aged care known as The People Empowerment Programme (PEP) that promoted local responses to the needs of older persons through actions by volunteers in delivering sustainable services such as provision of meals, home care, home visits, income generation projects and companionship. In the process, luncheon clubs were developed and promoted. Older persons are carrying the brunt of the HIV/Aids pandemic in South

Africa; almost 19 % of all households are run by them. This means that new care and support work has been developed to help the third generation parents to cope with ever increasing pressures.

Among the organizations that include older adults are a number of specialized societies (e.g. art/history/ecological/fitness) in the larger cities that tend to be dominated by retired well-educated middle class people. In addition, a remnant of the universities' extra mural programmes, such as that of the University of Cape Town's Summer School and the Lifelong Learning KwaZulu-Natal are patronized by many older adults. The University of the Third Age, to which we now turn, also caters for many of the specialized interests of older adults.

35.4 The University of the Third Age

There is an extensive international literature on the University of the Third Age (U3A), which had its origins in Toulouse, France in 1972 and has spread to countries all over the world (Findsen 2005; Huang 2006; Formosa 2010, 2013). The South African version of U3A took root in Cape Town in 2000 where it received a very enthusiastic response and has grown to 8,000 members in six branches in and around the city. The Central Cape Town branch alone has 1,500 members. It spread to other centres and now has approximately 11,000 members across 26 branches (U3A South Africa, undated). It has a decentralised structure and is run by local branch committees elected at annual general meetings, with meetings held at private homes, church or community halls, or local libraries.

While the Kha Ri Gude campaign caters for non-literate or low-literate older adults who are, as a result of South Africa's apartheid history, predominantly black African, and located in townships and rural areas, the University of the Third Age focuses on an entirely different demographic: predominantly white middle- and upper middle class older adults no longer in full-time employment. This constituency lives in the suburbs of the larger urban centres such as Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban, as well as in smaller towns known as preferred places of retirement, such as Howick in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, and Hermanus, Knysna and Plettenberg Bay in the Western Cape. U3A branches emphasise in their documents that membership is open to all persons interested in supporting its objectives "irrespective of religion, culture, race or educational background" (University of the Third Age Port Elizabeth undated, p. 1). However, the location of activities and transport difficulties mean that, in effect, membership tends to be middle class and "lily-white", as one committee member put it, with some exceptions in Cape Town. One branch exists in the traditionally "Coloured" (mixed race) area of Athlone, and a new branch has been started in Gugulethu, a black African township (Interview CT1, 2014).

Although different U3A branches formulate their aims in slightly different terms, there are three main foci. The first is around learning and "intellectual stimulation"—encouraging members to share their knowledge with others and learn from others.

The second, arising from and embedded in the first, is social and concerns providing social contacts for its membership. As one committee member put it, “To provide continuing education, stimulation and *companionship* (our emphasis) for the retired people” (Interview CT1, 2014). For some members this is the primary motivation for joining, especially those who have been widowed or whose children live far away. As a committee member put it, “The name is a little bit off-putting for some – more ‘learned’ than it is. In actual fact, here [Durban] the aim is more social, getting to know people and trying to learn new things” (Interview D2, 2014). The third is an advocacy aim and asserts the ability of older adults to continue learning: “To refute the idea of intellectual decline with age” (University of the Third Age Port Elizabeth undated, p. 1). U3A thus views older adults in terms that are very different from those of contemporary stereotypes: active, intellectually and socially engaged rather than passive, intellectually and physically declining, and isolated. This resonates with the international emphasis of U3As in “contributing strongly to the ongoing construction of societies where people age positively” (Formosa 2013, p. 234).

U3A’s approach in South Africa resonates with a liberal humanistic view of learning as valuable for its own sake. This contrasts with the instrumentalist, market-oriented emphasis of much adult education provision. However, there is also a strong social learning element in which the experiences of older adults are valued as resources for collective engagement and learning (learning and interacting with others). It also aligns with a lifelong learning perspective: that learning happens throughout the lifespan and does not necessarily decline with age.

U3A activities also differ from one branch to another but there is a common core of intellectual and social activities. The intellectual activities include once-off talks or courses delivered by current or retired academics or “enthusiastic amateurs” on particular topics, such as history, art appreciation, literature, languages, creative writing, current affairs and new communication technologies. Often members themselves are encouraged to give talks or lead courses on topics that they know about; for example, a retired jeweller running a course on gemstones. Social activities include physical exercise such as guided walks, circle dancing, yoga, craft activities such as crocheting, sewing and knitting, and social gatherings such as picnics and lunches. U3A also organises tours to places of interest such as factories, museums and botanical gardens, as well as longer trips to game reserves and Boer War battlefields, for example.

A typical U3A learning event would involve a guest speaker making a presentation on a topic of general interest, often using a computer presentation or other visual media. This would be followed by some time for questions, usually of clarification. There would not typically be an in-depth discussion or debate on the topic, and one member described the level of engagement as “university light”: “People don’t challenge, they don’t like argument and challenge. It’s all very polite and civilised” (Interview D1, 2014). This would be followed by refreshments and socialising.

The annual membership fee is low in all branches. In Cape Town, for example, current fees are R40 (US\$4) for those with e-mail and R60 (US\$6) for those relying on ordinary mail. Members also pay a nominal fee per event such as R5 (US\$0.50) to cover costs of refreshments. Despite these low fees, a committee member reported

that some pensioners could not afford them and so fees were “quietly waived” in such cases. There are no membership requirements related to educational level and no assessment or certification of courses.

Judging by the proliferation of branches and increase in membership, U3A appears to have been very effective in meeting the needs and interests of older, mainly white middle class adults in South Africa. This was corroborated by interviewees – one committee member reported a number of members saying to her, “Gosh, it’s made such a difference to my life having these activities to attend” (Interview D2, 2014). This can be attributed to a various factors: the range of activities (intellectual, recreational, social); the low fees; local control and initiative attuned to local circumstances; and the emphasis on learning for its own sake without the pressures of assessment. Despite these positive factors, both the U3A and Kha Ri Gude cases indicate a number of problematic issues for the education of older adults in South Africa. It is to these that we now turn.

35.5 Educational Accessibility

Whether an older adult is able to benefit from learning opportunities in South Africa depends largely on where they are located and what transport is available at what attendant cost. Kha Ri Gude has wide coverage, but for those who are not in walking distance of a venue, transport might simply not be available. As indicated above, U3A branches are located mainly in middle class suburban areas, which means that they are not easily accessible to older adults living in townships or rural areas. Other factors limiting access to U3A activities include language – English as the predominant U3A language of learning excludes non-speakers of English (only about 10 % of the South African population have English as a mother-tongue) – and cultural ethos: the middle class westernised ethos of U3A activities might not easily accommodate people from different cultural and class backgrounds. Although Kha Ri Gude has made efforts to include adults with disabilities, such as provision of materials in Braille, the wider social barriers to persons with disabilities, such as unsuitable transport and inaccessible venues, limit participation.

South Africa does have a huge distance education university, the University of South Africa, currently with over 300, 000 registered students per annum, which is open to older adults. People over the age of 23 may gain entrance without the normal full matriculation requirements.

35.6 Articulation

Unlike U3A, the Kha Ri Gude campaign does include an assessment regime. However, Kha Ri Gude does not in practice articulate with the existing Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) system of provision through Public Adult Learning Centres (themselves recognised by the state as somewhat dysfunctional and

currently subject to major policy changes). This means that, when an adult has completed the Kha Ri Gude course, there is no easy channel of progression into an ABET course. One of the problems with this is that newly literate adults need to practise using their literacy skills, otherwise there is the danger that they will lose them. If adult learners cannot progress to higher levels of learning, there is a chance that they will regress to previous literacy levels. Without articulation with a national adult basic education system that actually welcomes and accommodates newly literate learners (and particularly older ones), the longer term educational efficacy of campaigns like Kha Ri Gude is brought into question. Though South Africa has a national qualifications framework and a policy of lifelong learning which in principle allows for easy access to learning, articulation between qualifications and the recognition of prior learning, in practice the rhetoric of lifelong learning is much more prominent than its implementation (Aitchison 2004).

35.7 Target Group Coverage

Our study indicates that adult learning opportunities do exist for older adults in South Africa at either end of the educational spectrum: basic literacy and U3A (which, although not university-equivalent, assumes an “educated” membership) and suchlike. What is missing is provision for the “in-between” group of older adults – those who have a basic education but are not necessarily suburban and/or middle class. While public adult learning centres do provide education beyond basic literacy, they are increasingly dominated by young adults attempting to complete their Grade 12 qualification. Churches provide various learning opportunities in the form of bible studies and courses which include older adults, often in leadership roles, and this is an area that requires further research, as does the area of self-initiated learning among older people outside the formal frameworks. An example of this might be older adults’ mastery of new technologies and social media, often with the help of younger family members. However, besides this spiritual/religious learning, the “in-between” opportunities are scarce, and the development of an authentically inclusive learning nation in which older adults are learning citizens requires further attention.

35.8 Conclusion

Education for older adults in South Africa has largely been neglected until the last decade or so. Two initiatives, the Kha Ri Gude mass literacy campaign and the University of the Third Age, accommodate older adults at either end of the education spectrum. However, these initiatives are restricted by issues of accessibility and

articulation. In addition, there is limited educational provision for the “in-between” group of older adults with some education. Besides these gaps in provision, there are also lacunae in our knowledge of older adult learning in South Africa, particularly in areas such as non-formal religious learning and spiritual formation, learning within community collectives such as savings clubs and burial societies, and self-initiated individual learning projects. What is clear is that the promise of South Africa’s Constitution regarding the right of everyone to basic and further education is, despite some promising developments, yet to be fulfilled for most older adults.

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