



**43rd European University Continuing Education Network Conference
“Universities’ Engagement in and with Society. The University Lifelong Learning
contribution”**

**Wed 09 to Fri 11 May 2012, University of Graz, Austria
Dr. Hannes Spreitzer**

Opening address

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to welcome you on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection to this very important conference on the universities’ lifelong learning contribution.

Only a few decades ago, the concept of lifelong learning in later life was completely unfamiliar in normal usage.

Education is a lifelong process to extend a person’s knowledge, but also to be able to keep abreast of new developments, such as those in the field of technology.

Learning should be viewed as an opportunity for personal development, for the acquisition or extension of skills.

Forward-looking social policy has the task of making the idea of lifelong learning into an issue also for people in later life, and to consistently implement these ideas by means of specific measures.

Actively shaping the later stages of life is a challenge, but at the same time it is one of the great opportunities of our time.

It seems very important to me to note the following: it is a great achievement that people today have the possibility to experience the post-retirement phase of life in good health and safeguarded by social protection.

You know that the average period of time a person lives after retiring is currently over 20 years. This means that we have the opportunity and the responsibility to shape an entire chapter of people’s lives in a way that it is self-determined and meaningful.

There are older people who, having brought up a family and finished their working lives, give their life new meaning and completely rearrange it.

They show that they are flexible, and it doesn’t occur to them to withdraw into the traditional role of the pensioner.

Many older people are active in a variety of areas of society: in cultural life, in education, in the social sector, in sports and so on.

They are also increasingly interested in topics such as health/nutrition, different exercises, or sexuality.



However, it is not only motivating individuals to participate in education which is important. Surveys by Statistics Austria have shown that persons with a higher level of qualifications make more use of educational offers, so that educational inequalities tend to increase in old age.

A new culture of learning with relevant offers thus has to be developed to encourage older people to participate more in educational programmes.

At this point I would like to emphasise that in order to reach sectors of society which have previously had little contact with education, we need to provide offers which also deal with the everyday challenges which face people in later life. We need offers which enable learners to participate actively.

And there is a lot going on in Austria in this direction.

Thanks to the cooperation amongst a wide range of institutions, we have a multitude of high-quality educational offers for older people which are close to their homes:

- Adult education centres,
- church-based institutions,
- senior citizens' organisations,
- and increasingly also universities

are offering opportunities for continuing education.

They are being promoted by the Federal Ministry of Science and Research; the Ministry of Education, the Arts and Culture; the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection; the provincial governments (Bundesländer) and local authorities.

But there is still a lot to do, because these activities to promote education in later life are also a contribution towards opening up opportunities:

- for older people to update their everyday skills,
- for responsible health prevention,
- for personal development,
- and for social participation.

People are increasingly talking about active ageing; the EU has taken this up and declared 2012 to be the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations.

For politicians and policymakers, supporting suitable offers is a high-priority task. These should be designed to be low-threshold, accessible offers.

As early as 2009, the European Council adopted a 'Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training' - ET 2020.

In Austria we have a national strategy for lifelong learning: in this strategy the education in the post-retirement phase of life is of particular significance. Universities play an important role here – they have already taken on responsibility for education for all generations.



Yesterday evening you had the opportunity here in Graz to make yourselves familiar with the wide range of continuing education programmes offered by the Styrian Universities. The institutionalised cooperation between the universities in Styria is a good example of high-quality lifelong learning offers.

I would particularly like to emphasise the commitment shown by the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Graz - Thank you very much!

On the part of the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, various measures have been taken in recent years. These include:

- Commissioning fundamental research
- Developing guidelines and priorities
- Quality assurance
- The promotion of education in the post-retirement phase of life
- Collecting and analysing good-practice models
- Subsidising model projects
- Various workshops and conferences on continuing education.

We will continue our efforts to cooperate with a wide range of partners in this field and to support lifelong learning activities.

We would like to invite all those who work in the various areas of education and at its different levels to continue to pursue and shape education in the post-retirement phase of life as intensively as they have done until now.

I'm quite sure that this conference will make a significant contribution to this task! I wish you an interesting and lively event with many fruitful discussions on the development of perspectives for our future.

Dr. Hannes Spreitzer

Austrian Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection

May 2012