e-Learning for Seniors

1. Project Relevance

The project eLSe-Academy developed and established an e-learning academy for those older people who are interested in and able to acquire or further develop their competences in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

During the two-year term of the project, a flexible and accessible eLearning-based ICT qualification course that is tailored and pedagogically adapted to the needs of elderly learners was developed, tested, and evaluated. In order to cope

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Types of organisations involved: University, Association, municipality
Implementation level: European, national levels
Website: else-academy.org

with the diverse impairments and disabilities of seniors, a special focus was placed on multimedia elements such as demonstrations, audiovisual elements and interactive exercises.

The project also had **participation** and **activation** aspects, because it used a learner-centred approach. The main focus of the approach lies on the experiential, active learning of the target group, as well as on awakening interest in the effective use of the possibilities that can be provided by the Internet and Computer to people by showing what is possible.

*The project can be considered as good practice for ASLECT because it **empowers** seniors by means of teaching basic ICT skills. The key message of this project is the seniors' empowerment by means of upgrading their ICT skills. The main benefit of this project for seniors is the support they receive in the process of accessing and becoming involved in the information and knowledge society, and the help they get to overcome social isolation and support independent living. The main impact is the seniors' increased self-confidence in using ICT.*

2. Background and Aims

The eLSe-Academy involves eight partners from seven European countries: Institute for Innovation in Learning (FIM NewLearning), University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, the German National Association of Senior Citizens' Organisations (BAGSO), EDUcaline S.L. from Spain (EDU), imaginary srl from Italy, the municipality of Lulea in Northern Sweden, the University of the Third Age (U3A) in the UK, Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) in Lithuania and Vidéoscop, the audiovisual department within the university of Nancy 2 in France. All partners have very good liaisons and a sound cooperation with local, regional and national organisations and networks, *e.g.* in Germany the "Bavarian Senior Citizens Network (BSNF, DE)", in order to implement the outcomes of the project at a national level.

The context and needs: The post-professional life span can become a period that opens up new opportunities and new perspectives in an active and self-determined life. Besides this individual perspective, the societal perspective is of an equal importance: due to the decreasing birth rates throughout Europe, the competence and experience of older people will be absolutely fundamental in the future - in order to support the economic demands and

to maintain the overall competence of the European society. In addition, it is crucial to prevent the social isolation of senior citizens and to ensure that ageing populations are able to lead independent lives. A competent and meaningful use of ICT is a very supportive instrument in this context. Stimulated by the advent of new information and communication opportunities, our society is experiencing a major change in how information is distributed (e-Information), knowledge acquired (e-Learning) and in how services are provided *e.g.* eGovernment, eShopping, eBanking, eHealth). In order to participate in this increasingly complex information society and to keep up-to-date with new developments, older people definitely need competent communication, information and learning opportunities. Furthermore, due to the ubiquity and flexibility of new technologies, senior learners could benefit most from these technologies. Senior citizens are very much under-represented when it comes to use of ICT in a competent and self-directed way. The digital divide concerns, to a major extent, the older population. Two out of three third agers in the EU do not have any ICT competences and many of those seniors having some basic skills are not sufficiently skilled and competent to really access the opportunities of the Information and Knowledge Society.

In this context, the eLSe-Academy project tries to address these needs and aims at developing an eLearning environment that supports seniors in a very flexible way to become ICT-competent. The eLSe-Academy wants to significantly contribute to e-Inclusion by developing a technology-enhanced training on ICT especially devoted to the needs of seniors. The project wants to support European seniors and seniors' organisations with respect to the competent and self-directed use of ICT resources.

3. Description of the Target Groups

The main target group is formed of people having unsystematic and very fragmented ICT-knowledge that is insufficient to fully participate in the knowledge and information society. (persons of 60 years of age and older). The eLSe consortium tested and piloted the training in six countries. Testing and piloting were initially planed to involve about 200 partners; however, due to a tremendous interest, more than 300 persons were involved in the project activities.

The target groups which participated in pilot testing and training sessions in their countries met in ICT classrooms, as well as in a virtual classroom environment. The target group was formed of seniors having no or very little knowledge on the subject.

4. Outputs and Multiplying Outcomes

At the end of the project, the following results were reported:

1. User Needs Analysis: identification of the learners' needs in terms of interests, ICT skills, technical infrastructures, time availability. The results of the user needs analysis was reported in the document "User needs analysis".

2. Training Concept: a modular e-learning training concept to cope with the needs of the large and heterogeneous group of seniors was developed.

3. **Didactic Concept**: delivering the content using different media (text, audio, video, demonstration and interactive exercises) to best support seniors with different disabilities and impairments to participate in the training.

4. Learning Units: In total, 12 learning units were developed in the context of the eLSe-Academy. All units are now available in six languages (German, English (units 8-12 not completely implemented), Italian, Lithuanian, Swedish and Spanish). However, this can be just a start, since the underlying didactical concepts can be used to develop further units in the field of ICT as well as in other fields. Four of the units were also localised and tested in France (not foreseen in the working plan).

5. Virtual Classroom: An open source learning platform adapted for the target group in strict consideration of pedagogical needs and usability. The screen layout is very clear and easy to handle, and it provides only the necessary information.

6. Evaluation Concept and Instruments: An evaluation plan for the eLSe-Academy was developed to reach the main objectives: ensuring a high quality of the work within the eLSe consortium, and defining the evaluation aims and instruments for assessing the training and didactic concept, the training materials and technical platform and the added-value for the participants.

7. Exploitation Plan: The eLSe-Academy exploitation plan consists of measures for transferring the successful intermediate and final results and outcomes of the project to appropriate decision-makers on local, regional, national and European levels, and for motivating individual end users to get involved in the eLSe-Academy. A very important aspect in the exploitation plan is to involve further educational and senior organisations in the national eLSe-Academies.

8. Website and Further Dissemination Materials were produced in order to provide sufficient information about the project to potential learners, other interested individuals and organisations, as well as to decision-makers.

9. Evaluation Report which included a detailed description of the testing and evaluation activities in the different countries and an overview of the main evaluation results in the different countries.

All reports and documents are available online at the else-academy.org website.

5. Impact and Sustainability

The main and ultimate aim of the eLSe-Academy project is a sustainable use of the project outcomes in the participating countries. Concepts for the different countries involved were developed in three countries, namely Germany, Lithuania and Sweden, the eLSe-Academy training offer is now running with the support of other educational organisations. In the UK, the eLSe learning units were distributed (via CD) to the U3A local organisations. In Italy, a close cooperation with AICA, an educational association taking care of the e-citizens program, is at a very promising stage. In addition, a European strategy to implement the eLSe-Academy at a European level was developed; this involves firstly the certification of the eLSe-Academy training program for the e-citizens program. Besides, partners developed different scenarios for the use of the eLSe-Academy learning materials, *e.g.* eLSe as a support to in-classroom training activities or to support family relatives to help ICT beginners to become ICT competent. This concept is, for instance, being used in Germany in cooperation with the Bavarian Network of Senior Citizens, as well with the "Kompetenzzentrum" in Bielefeld.

The long-term aim of all activities remains to establish a self-running, self-sustaining e-Learning academy used by seniors all over Europe in order to support their acquisition of ICT-competences because the experience, the opportunities which can be provided to them by the information and knowledge society can thus enhance the quality of their lives. In Germany, as well as in Sweden and Lithuania, the partnership is very close to reach this aim. In the other countries, the outcomes of eLSe-Academy will be further used for training activities.

Based on the feedback from participants, the impact of the project seems quite powerful: According to seniors:
-the learning units are well structured, and the didactical approach and elements are most suitable for them;
-the virtual classroom is appealing, easy to handle and suitable for training;
-the support by the tutor is essential and most helpful;
-the participants confirmed the assumptions of the eLSe-Academy team: e-learning works extremely well for the target group of seniors, because it is flexible in terms of contents, learning time and pace.

6.   Educational Process

The pedagogical concept for the eLSe-Academy is based on a learner-centred approach. The model uses the metaphor of an "onion" with multiple layers. The learner – a Senior Citizen - is located inside the innermost layer, surrounded by a first layer with content, technology and support. The organisation, economy and evaluation shells are located in the core. Each layer can subsequently be split into as many fields as necessary. In the learner nucleus, the learner as a group and as an individual is profiled. This profiling process is undergone in each of the participating countries. Common aspects and differences are analysed, and the results had a major effect on the development of content– curriculum, pedagogical and didactic approach, and authoring process - on the technical system to be used and on the support infrastructure, basically the organisation, tutoring and technical hotline. The technology, content and support fields mutually influence each other. For instance, didactic and pedagogical aspects have a major influence on technologies (*e.g.* use of video, audio or simulation elements) or, to give another example, the communication channels required to support participants have an influence on the hardware and bandwidth requirements. The organisation layer contains all the actions to be taken for embedding the course; it focuses on quality management, course management, learner acquisition, tutor acquisition and training. The economy layer contains all aspects of learning and training economy (time, financial and human resources), economy of scale, fixed and variable costs, preparation and running costs. And, finally, the evaluation layer includes all the activities and tools for ensuring learner's satisfaction and achievement of previously defined goals.

Didactic approach: The main focus is placed on the experiential, active learning. Real-life examples are provided at the beginning of the units for the introduction of a specific learning content and practice. The question "why should I learn this?" is answered in a comprehensible form, and it is connected to real-life examples. The learning contents will respect the learners' heterogeneity: the segmentation of the content will be adapted to the seniors' learning pace and attention span, while different media (audio, video, text) will be used for the same content, a modular course concept allows for choosing and aggregating a variable number of learning modules to one course, respecting previous knowledge, demands and preferences.

This is important because the use of ICT technologies is very widespread in almost every area of social life. Thus, basic ICT skills are very important for seniors to lead an independent life.