

# Meta-analysis of Lifelong Learning Realization in Kazakhstan: Trends and Obstacles in the University of the Third Age

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*Abstract— The University of the Third Age (U3A) is a thriving adult education initiative that offers older adults a variety of activities aimed at enhancing their well-being during their later years. The first U3A began functioning in Kazakhstan in 2021. Over the past three years, this vector of education has already achieved a degree of recognition in our society. However, there are also a number of controversial opinions about the future of the U3A in Kazakhstan. This paper analyzes the implementation of this innovative form of lifelong learning, based on the semi-annual reports of the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The purpose is to address the main trends, perspectives and obstacles that the project has faced. Using the method of systematic review and analysis of secondary data, the paper answers several research questions: how has the number of the U3A programs and learners in Kazakhstan changed throughout the 3-year period? How have trends in popular U3A programs changed? What are the perspectives and potential dangers of the U3A realization in Kazakhstan? The results of the study indicated that, despite an increase in the number of older people within the period of 2022-2023, the U3A still face a lack of interest from the elderly in Kazakhstan. Based on the reported results, the article considers future potential for the development of lifelong education /U3A in Kazakhstan.*

*Keywords— Adult Learning, Adult Education, Elder Generation, Lifelong Learning, University of the Third Age.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the University of the Third Age (U3A) was originated in France in 1973 and was conceived as a social initiative to provide the older generation with knowledge and skills aligned with their interests. The U3A programs were designed to address the feeling of loneliness and worthlessness often experienced by individuals in their “third age” and help them rediscover a sense of purpose in life. While such courses emphasized learning and communication, they did not involve assigning exams or homework. This initiative has been widely adopted around the world, fueled by an increasing demand for education among the growing elderly population, their longevity, and heightened levels of vitality within the older community [1].

One of the most important educational tenets in Kazakhstan today is the idea of lifelong learning. The University of the Third Age is a good example of the lifelong principle realization in Kazakhstan. It enables older people and retired members discover a new purpose in life, express themselves and reach their full potential, extend their lifespan, and widen their social network. The potential for older people to acquire new skills and information, boost their confidence, and actively engage in the civic life of a city or region is unquestionably the primary objective of U3A. Nevertheless, U3A's history in Kazakhstan is quite brief, and not much research has been done on the subject. Therefore, this study will contribute to the development of U3A sphere in Kazakhstan by analyzing its current state and problems.

Since 2021, several universities in Kazakhstan have been offering special courses for learners over 50 [2]. These universities are known as universities of the third age or “Silver universities.” They operate based on the principles of lifelong learning and align with the “Kazakhstan-2030” Strategy, which underscores longevity as a vital aspect of national development.

The third-age universities employ various models from different countries. For example, Nadirova [3] highlights the British U3A model, where seniors create a network for mutual communication and collaboration, fully independent of higher education institutions. The primary goal of this model is to facilitate mutual learning and cooperation among participants.

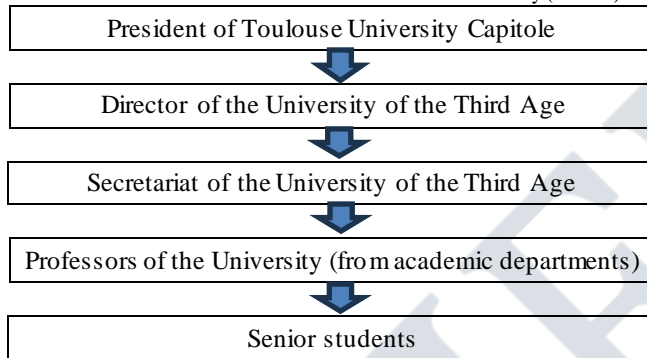
The British Third Age Trust is a prime illustration of the U3A model used in Britain. In contrast to the French model, U3A are mostly autonomous associations, and senior education and lifelong learning are not as well-regulated in the UK.

Incorporated and registered as a charity in 1983, the Third Age Trust is a Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee. A chairman, three additional officers, and twelve representatives from the various regions of the United Kingdom make up the National Executive Committee, which oversees its operations. With the odd grant for particular projects, the Third Age Trust is mostly supported by the yearly subscriptions of its member U3As. Its Bromley location employs seven full-time and seven part-time employees. There are now 950 U3As in the UK and 350,000 senior members [4].

Conversely, the French model integrates the U3A into the private education sector and closely associates it with universities, encouraging joint classes for young individuals and retirees to enhance interaction [3].

Toulouse University's first University of the Third Age serves as an illustration of the French model of university-run U3A. Professor Pierre Vellas founded the University of the Third Age in Toulouse in 1973. At first, it offered a gerontology course in the Faculty of Social Sciences that was just for retirees. Enhancing memory and participating in activities that promote better nutrition and health were the main topics of the presentations. Professor Vellas added further classes, such as ones centered on languages and gymnastics, in response to the enthusiastic reception this course received. Toulouse University of the Third Age is a branch of Toulouse University and part of the Continuing Education Department (Table 1).

**Table I.** Structural Model of U3A at Toulouse University (France)



The Director of the University of the Third Age, who has the authority to hire employees and has an office in the university's building, is directly appointed by the president of the university. All of the parent university's resources are available to the University of Third Age, including:

- (1) asking academics from various fields to teach and give lectures at the university.
- (2) using classrooms and amphitheatres.
- (3) making use of the University's IT resources and technology to teach foreign languages.

A public university's direct management has many benefits, including the provision of resources and buildings, hiring of personnel, usage of the university website, and reputation. However, there are drawbacks as well, such as reliance on the university, overcapacity, and rigidity. However, there is a national body, called "the Third Age Trust", which represents all the U3A in the UK [4].

Thus, the sector of the U3A is constantly developing, and new models and techniques are being adopted in this sphere around the world.

Although the history of third-age education in Kazakhstan is still in its infancy, it holds promising potential for the future. The Higher Education Development National Center [5] reports that there are currently 32 third-age universities in Kazakhstan, representing 31% of all higher education

institutions in the country, which altogether offer 214 educational programs to elderly. These numbers may seem relatively stable; however, they do not demonstrate rapid progress in the sphere of the U3A throughout the three-year history.

Nowadays, one of the key national policies of Kazakhstan focuses on promoting national health and longevity. In this regard, several studies have been conducted. According to demographic projections by UNFPA (United Nations Fund for Population Activities), one of the major shifts in Kazakhstan's population age structure over the next three decades will increase in both the absolute and relative numbers of older individuals, a phenomenon known as demographic aging [6].

According to the analysis of the demographic situation in the Republic of Kazakhstan, the percentage of the elderly in our country will increase from 20.8% in 2019 to 37.8% in 2050, while the percentage of children will decrease, respectively, from 79.2% to 62.2% [7]. This structural transformation may cause a significant impact on the socio-economic development of the country and should, therefore, be considered in further strategic planning.

According to the assessment of the socio-economic situation and the older generation needs in Kazakhstan, after the lifting of restrictions related to the pandemic, more than half of the elderly (57%) express interest in attending various cultural and leisure events such as concerts, theaters, cinemas. Also, a significant proportion (38%) prefer to visit swimming pools and about a third (30%) would prefer to visit libraries [8].

The results of the monitoring of the "Active longevity" 2025 plan implementation, indicate that the vast majority of senior citizens of Kazakhstan retains their efficiency, competence, and intellectual potential. The report states that 47% of respondents have a positive attitude towards the opportunity to work on a voluntary basis in various organizations [9]. Taking this into consideration, it is obvious that the U3A can potentially address the problems of aging and low quality of life in Kazakhstan and around the world.

The report on Bologna principles implementation in higher educational institutions (HEI) on the second half of 2023 shows that 518 students over 50 and 930 students over 60 participated in educational programs of the U3A across Kazakhstan [7]. At the same time, while the number of universities of the third age has grown from 28 in 2022 to 32 in 2023, the number of higher graduate educational programs (HGEP) and the courses participants (CP) have decreased.

The annual assessment indicates a decline of 30.6% in the number of participants in the U3A courses. This significant drop raises questions about the underlying causes for such a result.

Several challenges hinder the implementation of silver education in Kazakhstan, including courses fees, low motivation of older individuals, inadequate technical infrastructure, insufficient qualification of teaching staff, and

limited information channels [5].

Conversely, silver education has been effectively integrated into several universities in Kazakhstan. For instance, Ualikhanov University regularly shares the process of realization of U3A courses on its Facebook page, highlighting that the English Language course is particularly popular, with over 30 students actively working to improve their skills [10]. Additionally, the Eurasian National University (ENU) has recently launched a Digital Skills course for individuals over 50, conducted in the Kazakh language [11]. There are also ongoing discussions about introducing the Chinese language courses for seniors next year at ENU.

While the U3A gradually establishes its role within the national educational framework, Nadirova points out certain risk factors in this domain. She emphasizes the significant responsibility higher education institutions bear regarding silver education. According to her, local silver universities may not fully grasp their roles, unlike their counterparts in Europe or the USA, which stems from the low motivation of the teaching staff and administration. She suggests several solutions, including regular national and international accreditations to ensure the U3A programs remain free or partially funded by the government, as well as ongoing assessments of the factors influencing older learners' motivation and engagement.

Additionally, the Agency of Professional News [12] notes that over 1,500 individuals have enrolled in the Kazakh model of the U3A. Admission does not require exams; interested participants only need to complete an application on the university's website, while the training is offered at no cost.

There is also a project initiated by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection called "Silver Age." The project provides free courses through the "Skills Enbek" platform for people above 50 [13].

From these observations, I can conclude that:

Firstly, silver education is a relatively new field in Kazakhstan that clearly requires further exploration and enhancements.

Secondly, silver education aligns with the principles of lifelong learning and the "Kazakhstan-2030" Strategy. The successful execution of this educational direction could contribute to a broader national improvement.

Thirdly, the comparative analysis of 2023 showed the decrease in number of participants of silver education programs, which might be caused by several factors, including low information level.

This study details silver education implementation in Kazakhstan within the principle of lifelong learning. The aim of the research is to analyze the main trends, perspectives and obstacles in lifelong learning/the U3A in Kazakhstan, based on the three semi-annual reports of the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Accordingly, the following research questions were

identified:

How has the number of the U3A in relation to overall HEI number in Kazakhstan changed throughout a 3-year period?

How have trends in the U3A programs (HGEP) in relation to the number U3A changed throughout the period?

What are the perspectives and potential dangers of the U3A realization in Kazakhstan?

The article also looks to figure out future potential of lifelong education/the U3A in Kazakhstan.

## II. METHODS

The methods used in this study are the method of systematic review and secondary data analysis. The choice of the methods is specified by the descriptive nature of this study, as well as the research questions that this paper answers. The data come from the three national documents reporting on the situation with the U3A in Kazakhstan from second half of 2022 and first and second halves of 2023:

*Higher Education Development national Center: The Report on Realization of Lifelong Learning in HEI in Kazakhstan. ENIC-KAZAKHSTAN, 2022*

*Higher Education Development national Center: The Report on Realization of Lifelong Learning in HEI in Kazakhstan. ENIC-KAZAKHSTAN, 2023 (I)*

*Higher Education Development national Center: The Report on Realization of Lifelong Learning in HEI in Kazakhstan. ENIC-KAZAKHSTAN, 2023 (II)*

The three reports present the results of the research conducted among the faculty and staff of the universities of the third age in Kazakhstan. The reports focus on several main points:

The number of the universities of the third age and their educational programs in Kazakhstan.

The number of course participants (CP) and instructors (I) at the universities of the third age in Kazakhstan.

The prioritized educational programs at the universities of the third age in Kazakhstan.

Marketing and promotion policies of the universities of the third age in Kazakhstan.

The key problems of the realization of lifelong learning principle at the universities of the third age in Kazakhstan.

The information from the above-mentioned documents has been used in order to investigate the key changes and trends in the sphere of the U3A in Kazakhstan within a three-year period of time.

To conduct this study the subject literature review has also been implemented. The main criteria for the selection of the works were the subject matter matching that of the review, as well as their recency. Studies related to the subject of education of older adults conducted by distinguished Kazakh researchers in the field of lifelong learning, were taken into account (Nadirova, 2019, Sakeev, Niyazov, Zhabagina & Zhassenkyzy, 2022, Arkhangelsky, Denisenko, Elizarov, Zhusupov. & Moldakulova, 2019, Alimbekova, Shabdenova,



Moldakulova, Zhushupova & Rezvushkina, 2020). To study the three above-mentioned national reports, descriptive analysis was used. The data obtained as a result of the descriptive analyses were grouped according to the identified themes to answer the research questions stated in the introduction. They refer to the description of the development and dissemination of knowledge about the U3A ideas and problems, providing an understanding of the trends and perspectives in this sphere.

### III. RESULTS

To answer the first research question, the data regarding the trends in number of the universities of the third age (U3A) and the number of higher educational institutions (HEI) in Kazakhstan throughout a 3-year period has been considered.

The results showed that the overall number of HEI in Kazakhstan did not change within a three-year period. Overall, there were 102 HEI in 2022 and the first half of 2023, and by the end of 2023 this number grew to 103. As for the number of the universities of the third age, the report indicated a significant drop from 78 U3A in 2022 to 33 and 32 in 2023 (first half) and 2023 (second half) respectively. This means in percentage, the number of the U3A made 76.5% of all HEI in 2022 and only 32% and 31% in 2023 first and second halves. While the number of HEI demonstrates slow but stable growth, the U3A indicator dramatically decreased at the end of 2022-beginning of 2023.

The comparative analysis of the U3A programs number was carried out to answer the second research question. According to the results, the number of higher and graduate education programs (HGEP) constantly changes throughout a three-year history of U3A. This number decreased from 234 in 2022 to 209 in the first half of 2023. Then it slightly grew (214) in the second half of 2023. These numbers do not align with the overall number of the U3A. In 2022 only 234 HGEP were provided by 78 universities of the third age, which made a proportion of 234/78, meaning that on average, 3 educational programs were provided by each university. While the number of U3A dropped dramatically, the number of educational programs only slightly decreased in the next year, making a proportion of 209/33. At the same time, according to [13], general demographic trend in the Republic of Kazakhstan shows positive change. The percentage of people living in Kazakhstan grew from 73.18% to 75.09%.

To answer the last research question, the analysis of the current problems of U3A, described in the three documents, has been conducted. According to the reports, the number of faculty in the universities of the third age is constantly decreasing (from 351 in 2022 to 247 in 2023).

Figure 1 presents the comparative analysis of the above-mentioned point across the period of three years.

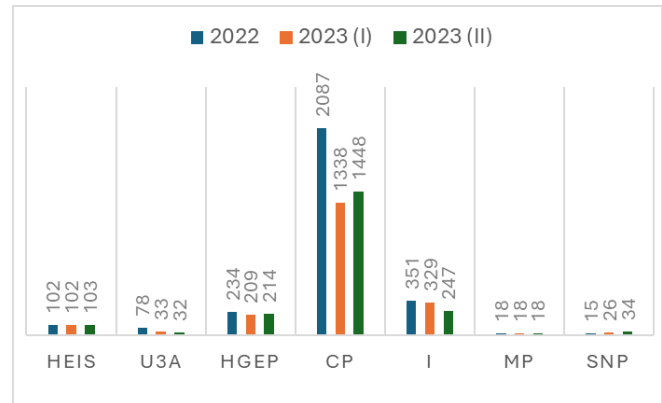


Fig. 1 Comparative analysis of lifelong learning implementation in Kazakhstan in 2022-2023

According to the documents, the main problems in realization of the principle of lifelong learning/the U3A in Kazakhstan are the following: difficulties in recruiting learners, irrelevant price, lack of motivation and engagement of elderly, overall poor experience of realization of education of the third age, poor technical equipment, lack of qualified faculty. At the same time, among the suggestions to improve the situation with the U3A in Kazakhstan the following points are mentioned: allocating public budget to facilitate free or partially paid learning, professional faculty training organization, increase faculty motivation by adding U3A courses to their general workload, enhancing marketing and promotion of U3A to people of Kazakhstan through various information channels.

### IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Having analyzed the three public documents on the realization of lifelong learning and the U3A in Kazakhstan, I have come to conclusion that this sphere has numerous gaps and uncertainties.

First, according to the results, the U3A programs accounted for 76.5% of all HEI in 2022, but this figure fell to 32% and 31% in the first and second halves of 2023, respectively. While HEI showed a gradual and steady increase, the U3A figures fell sharply from late 2022 to early 2023. This trend clearly indicates a diminishing interest among the elderly population in Kazakhstan regarding the U3A courses year after year.

Second, the number of higher and graduate education programs (HGEP) fluctuated over the three-year period of the U3A's existence. It decreased from 234 in 2022 to 209 in the latter half of 2023, before slightly rising to 214 in the end of 2023. These statistics do not correspond with the overall pattern of the U3A numbers. In 2022, 78 U3A institutions offered 234 HGEP, averaging three programs each. Although the number of the U3A institutions sharply declined, the educational programs saw only a minor decrease, leading to an average of six programs per remaining institution (209/33) at the beginning of 2023. By the end of 2023, this ratio had further changed to approximately seven programs per

institution (214/32). This fact might have caused additional pressure to universities' administration and faculty in terms of the U3A courses preparation and teaching. This, in its turn, might have resulted in the decreased motivation of the U3A faculty and staff to maintain effective U3A programs realization. These aspects need further numerical investigation.

Furthermore, while the number of the U3A courses learners is decreasing year by year, general demographic trends in Kazakhstan exhibited positive tendency, with the population rising from 73.18% to 75.09%. Therefore, this pattern indicates a negative correlation between population growth and the number of the U3A course attendees in Kazakhstan. Which means that in more recent times, in Kazakhstan, people over 50 do not show as much interest towards learning as they did in the past.

Lastly, to tackle the final research question, an analysis was conducted on the current challenges faced by the U3A, as highlighted in the three documents. In accordance with the results, the primary obstacles to implementing the lifelong learning principle in Kazakhstan include difficulties in attracting participants, inappropriate pricing, lack of motivation and engagement among the elderly, inadequate experience in delivering education for older adults, insufficient technical resources, and a shortage of qualified faculty. Additionally, several suggestions were posited to enhance the situation of the U3A in Kazakhstan, such as allocating public budget to facilitate free or partially paid learning, ensuring professional faculty training, increasing faculty motivation by adding the U3A courses to instructors' general workload, enhancing marketing and promotion of the U3A to people of Kazakhstan through various information channels.

In terms of promotion of the U3A, several universities regularly present their social media plans. However, the reports indicated that the number of presented social plans remains the same (18) for the three years. This might be another reason of low interest from elderly, as with the development of technology the number of media plans to promote the U3A is logically expected to grow more rapidly.

Furthermore, according to the study by Fang et al. (2017), older generation may benefit from getting an access to information and communication technology. The use of ICT has the potential to improve older people's psychological well-being (PWB). ICT use can help older persons (75+) improve their PWB by making it easier for them to communicate with relatives. Those who were frail might find these advantages more noteworthy. Enhancing older people's literacy and their access to ICT may help the situation [14]. This can also significantly increase the interests towards U3A from the elderly. However, there were a number of issues with ICT in Kazakhstani education. First, most towns lack mobile Internet connection, and several large suburbs have slow speeds. Second, some teachers, particularly older teachers, struggle with information technology and are

unable to completely supply the topic with instructional materials. Third, providing ICT takes a significant amount of time and money, which calls for increased funding. Fourth, the lack of complete electrical power in some parts of Kazakhstan makes schooling more difficult [15]. Taking into consideration these issues will help maintain the realization of the lifelong principle in Kazakhstan.

At the same time, some universities of the third age reported to have posted updates about the U3A courses implementation on their social networks (Facebook, Instagram etc.). Interesting fact is that the general number of posts created by the universities of the third age, is demonstrating stable growth (from 15 in 2022 to 34 in the second half of 2023). As the universities first started to increase their social network activity in the first half of 2023, the number of learners slightly enlarged, as well. In this regard, it can be suggested that the coming reports will indicate even higher number of learners enrolled into the U3A courses in Kazakhstan, because the latest number of social media post further increased.

Surprisingly, having compared all the three public reports on the U3A, I have noticed that the problems and the suggested solutions in this sphere remain the same throughout the three-year period. Although, the analyzed period may not be long, some updates in the area are vital, as new trends and tendencies emerge every year or even more often, particularly in education. Therefore, even if nothing significant was done to improve the sphere of the U3A, the problems might have become different by 2023 and/or increased in number. Therefore, the absence of changes in the problems and solutions description signals of any (or all) of the following important issues:

The problems indicated in the reports have not been identified/interpreted adequately.

The solutions indicated in the reports have not been identified/interpreted/implemented adequately.

The information in the presented reports is not accurate.

Furthermore, based on an evaluation of the socio-economic conditions and the needs of the elderly population in Kazakhstan, it has been observed that after the pandemic-related restrictions were lifted, over half of seniors (57%) expressed a desire to participate in cultural and recreational activities such as concerts, theaters, and cinemas. Additionally, a notable percentage (38%) indicated a preference for swimming pool visits, while around a third (30%) showed interest in going to libraries.

This idea goes in line with the report on implementation of the "Active Longevity" plan 2025. It reveals that most elderly citizens in Kazakhstan maintain their productivity, skills and cognitive abilities. The report highlights that 47% of participants are open to volunteer opportunities in various organizations. These results indicate that in Kazakhstan, people over 50 still have energy and desire to lead an active lifestyle and learning at university might be a great part of it. From this perspective, the U3A still has the potential to tackle

issues related to aging and the overall quality of life in Kazakhstan.

The mentioned above points bring me to the conclusion that the share of older generation learners in Kazakhstan could have been much bigger up to 2023 but is rather decreasing year by year. In this regard, the future of the U3A in Kazakhstan seems vague and unstable at this point. There might be various reasons for that, such as insufficient budget allocation, poor marketing, improper technological equipment and others.

Generally, the findings of the present article match with the ideas of Nadirova [3], who identifies certain risks in this area. She underscores the considerable responsibility that higher education institutions hold regarding silver education. According to her, local institutions may lack a full understanding of their roles compared to their counterparts in Europe and the USA, primarily due to low motivation among teaching staff and management. She proposes solutions such as regular national and international accreditation to maintain U3A programs that are either free or government-subsidized, along with continuous evaluations of factors affecting older learners' motivation and engagement.

The present study indicated the following conclusions:

Firstly, silver education is a relatively new area in Kazakhstan that requires ongoing exploration and enhancement.

Secondly, the U3A is supposed to be implemented in accordance with the lifelong learning principle and the "Kazakhstan-2030" Strategy. Successful implementation of this educational initiative could lead to broader national advancements.

Thirdly, the comparative analysis of lifelong learning/the U3A implementation showed the decrease in number of participants of the U3A programs, which might be caused by several factors, including low information level.

Thus, up to this point the sphere of the U3A is not being actively developed and supported. There are sufficient gaps in defining current problems and solutions in the area, as well as in the implementation of the learning process. Further research is needed to measure the efficacy of marketing and promotion policy of the universities of the third age. Also, empirical research of older generation's needs and interests may reveal the expectations of elderly from the U3A in Kazakhstan and increase their engagement.

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