

## Learning at later age Desires and motivation of people over 50

Report of a survey in the Northern Netherlands, carried out by a workgroup of the  
Senioren Academie Groningen-Friesland-Drenthe



Phase 2 of the European project **Educational Senior Network**.  
How can the education for older people be better adjusted to a broader group  
of people over 50?



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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the project Educational Senior Network (EduSenNet) seven partner institutions from six European countries (all members of the European Federation of Older Students in Universities ( EFOS) work together to research ways to let more older people participate in education. Life Long Learning enriches the life of older people. The project is sponsored by the Erasmus+ programme of the EU.

In The Netherlands the research is done by a group of older students of the Senioren Academie Groningen-Friesland-Drenthe (the workgroup). This report gives an account of the survey carried out by the workgroup in October and November 2015 as part 2 of the EduSenNet project.

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Groningen, February 2016

## II. THE PROJECT

With the EduSenNet project the seven partner institutions aim to:

- gather and share information
- make a wider and improved use of all these rich experiences
- disseminating the research results
- create a network for future cooperation

The project is split up in three phases:

1. an inventory of the present learning facilities for older people
2. through direct contact with older people:
  - investigate why they do not participate in learning activities
  - stimulate them to think about learning in later life
  - let them describe how education should look like, to be attractive to them
3. a qualitative and quantitative analysis of this survey to come to concrete recommendations for education facilities for people over 50

In the first phase of the EduSenNet project basic data was compiled about the present higher education for older people offered by the member institutions of the European Federation of Older Students in Universities (EFOS).

In the second phase a questionnaire was set up, aimed at collecting basic information needed in the third phase to formulate recommendations for improved access to learning facilities for a wide range of older people, regardless of background, social status, degree of independence and mobility.

This questionnaire was handed out to people over 50 to investigate their needs, requirements, experiences, opinions and handicaps with respect to the various forms of learning. This same survey was carried out by all seven partners in their own region. Each partner documented the results in his own report.

\*The partners of the EduSenNet project are:

- Comenius University / Centre for Continuing Education, Bratislava (Slovakia) ,  
coördinator
- Uppsala Senioruniversitet, Uppsala (Sweden)
- Otto-von-Guericke-Universität, Magdeburg (Germany)
- Seniorenkolleg an der TU Chemnitz, Chemnitz (Germany)
- Senioren Academie Groningen-Friesland-Drenthe, Groningen (Netherlands)
- University of the Third Age - Brno University of Technology, Brno (Czech Republic)
- Universidad Permanente of the University of Alicante, Alicante (Spain)

### III. THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Our team has translated the written questionnaire from English into Dutch and has adapted the questionnaire in certain aspects to the circumstances in the Netherlands, in order to make it more accessible for the respondents. The sequence of some of the questions was re-arranged and the list of choices was extended for some of the multiple choice questions. The Dutch version of this report reflects the answers to the Dutch questionnaire. For the English version the report was reworked to correspond with the international (English) questionnaire to make it comparable to the reports of the other partners.

When choosing our target groups we considered the following considerations of importance. The so called CBS (Central Bureau of Statistics in the Netherlands) notices in its population forecast, that in the year 2019 half of the people older than 18 will be over 50 years of age. In some municipalities this percentage will be higher than others. This applies especially to the provinces of Friesland, Groningen and Drenthe, the provinces where our Senioren Academie is active.

The highest increase in numbers falls into the group between 65 and 75 years of age.

A. Our team has focused on elderly of 50 years and above who, as we assume, don't have that easily access to the different types of education, including the Senioren Academie.

1. elderly who live rather isolated with limited sources of information
2. elderly who are limited in their mobility
3. elderly with other physical restrictions
4. elderly with financial restrictions
5. elderly who live at a long distance from places where education is offered, with limited or no public transport

In order to reach as much persons from these peer groups we have contacted various organisations.

#### *Neighbourhood associations*

Although with these organisations all grown-ups are welcome, the visitors mainly consist of people older than 55, who can be classified in one of the above mentioned categories. These organisations offer a large variety of cultural and social events for their members, emphasising on the recreational aspect. The level of training varies from secondary to higher (professional) education.

#### *Professional neighbourhood care*

Most of the clients of professional neighbourhood care belong to the above mentioned peer groups 2 and 3. They live independently, but are housebound by their physical limitations and they are dependent on (professional) caretakers. Often their financial capability is also limited.

#### *Care centres*

People who live in care centres can be categorized in all of the five peer groups. They live independently, with a maximum of facilities and caretaking. Most elderly of this group have also financial limitations.

B. In the group of 65 years and older, professionals and scientists recognize the so called Grampies (Growing, Retired, Active, Moneyed, Persons in an Excellent State). It seems obvious that these Grampies will find it easy to get access to learning for the elderly. However, our team considered it important to include the Grampies in the respondents, in

order to get an overall view on the intellectual development of the elderly.

In order to get into contact with the Grampies we distributed written questionnaires among the following groups.

*Former students of the Senioren Academie Groningen-Friesland-Drenthe*

We approached elderly who have not, for a variety of reasons, been following courses of the University during the last four years. Most of them are well educated, enjoy a good pension and live in the villages and towns of the three Northern provinces.

*The association of women with university degrees*

All these women have been working professionally most of their lives, which in former times was quite unusual. On the whole they are comfortably off and they appreciate being in academic circles.

*'Women of Today'*

The target of this national organisation is to use the power of women to empower their social environment, whatever their political view or religion. Most of the members are trained at a secondary or higher level, some of them studied at the university. The local divisions organise different kinds of activities in the range of education up to recreation. The social part of the activities is highly estimated.

*The Sneek Lodge of Freemasonry*

The Lodge in the town of Sneek in Friesland is part of the international congregation of Freemasonry.

They aim at spiritual and moral uplift, mutual respect and support. The educational level of the Masons varies from secondary up to university level.

*The St. Maarten Lodge of Odd Fellows in Groningen-city*

The international Independent Order of Odd Fellows aims to provide a framework that promotes personal and social development. Its members can be both male or female. For confidential conversations a discretion code is being followed.

*Clubs For the Elderly and Cafés for 50-plus*

Most of the visitors of the Clubs and Cafés-50 plus live independently. Their (social) background and educational level vary considerably. They meet weekly and their activities emphasize recreation and practical skills. The Café-50 plus in Groningen-City offers lectures on different themes, with possibilities for visitors to exchange their experiences.

C. Finally our team has approached some individual elderly.

Most of them are older than seventy, their physical condition is good or reasonably good and they find themselves fit enough to take part in activities away from their homes. They enjoy enough financial income.

The survey was carried out in October-November 2015.

## IV. POPULATION, SAMPLE AND RESPONSE

(definitions Kotler, Principles of Marketing)

### 1. Population

Within the *total market* (set of all actual and potential buyers of a product) of advanced education for seniors in Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe, our *potential market* (set of customers who profess some level of interest in a particular product) is defined by the question in the survey: “Do you think learning in later life is important and are you interested in taking part in learning activities?”

Within this category we determined the population to sample as the *available market* (set of customers who have interest, income and access to a particular product). This study focuses on the part of the available market that does not (either not any more or not yet) make use of the appropriate educational programmes.

### 2. Sampling procedure

Our workgroup of 6 people had random access to the sampling population in the area. Clustering the elements of the sample around those random numbers was an effective way of obtaining the target size of the total sample. That being fixed by the project coordinator to a minimum of 100 filled in questionnaires, we settled on a target of 20 respondents per person. In principle the questionnaires were planted by email, if necessary after personal introduction (directly or by an intermediary). If this turned out to be a problem, a print was provided and in due time collected.

### 3. Response

Quantitatively the target of the sample is largely met (135 respondents). As to the quality the following conditions should be taken into account:

- The focus of our study (qualified persons who do NOT make use of advanced educational services) implies that the involvement of respondents with the subject was low. Considerable effort to gather the response was required. Another symptom of this was the amount of partial non-response (not completed questionnaires, question marks where explanation was asked for).
- A general disgust with surveys by email grows due to suppliers of services and products frequently using this instrument to measure customer satisfaction. This also applies for the senior segment.
- Organizations and institutions in the field of senior education and culture are confronted with shrinking budgets and facilities. Their inclination to facilitate research like ours is low.
- Social associations like clubs and unions have other reservations: they do not want to annoy the members, want to respect their privacy, want them to have a good time.

These factors interfered with the fieldwork and probably incidentally also with the quality of the response.

Nonetheless, our study provided ample interesting and intriguing information, which was as a rule generously provided by an eager public.

## V. RESULTS

- A. Personal data
- B. Interest in learning

*\* Literal quotes of respondents are shown in italic*

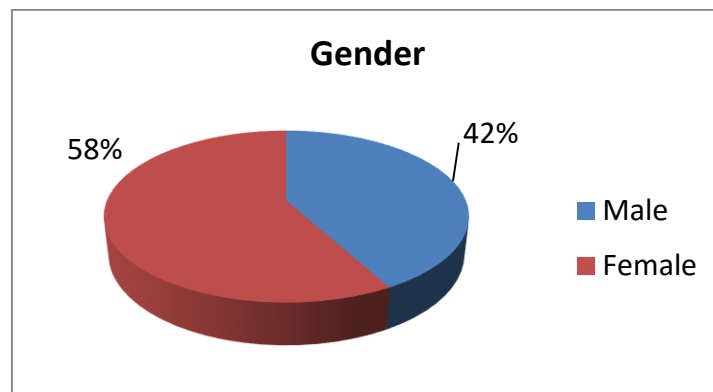
### Part A. Personal data

#### A.1 The country in which you live:

We received a total of 135 filled in questionnaires from the three Northern provinces of The Netherlands.

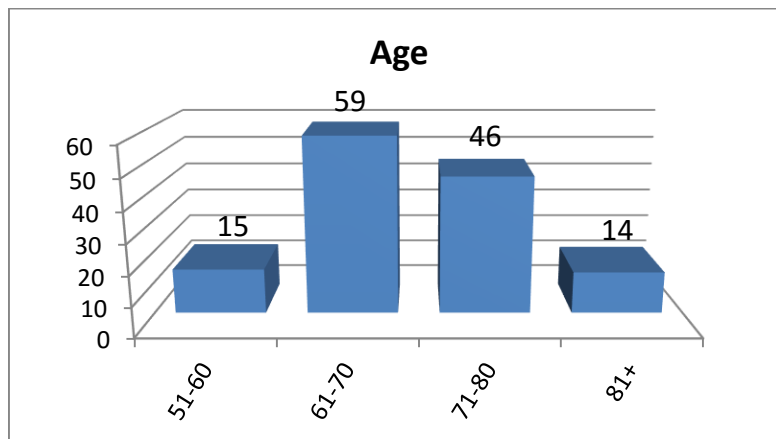
#### A.2 Gender

There were 76 (58%) women and 55 (42%) men among the respondents (4 didn't answer).



#### A.3 Age

The respondents are people over 50. 15 of them are 51-60 years of age, 59 are 61-70 years old, 46 have an age of 71-80 years and 14 are 81 years or older. 1 didn't answer.

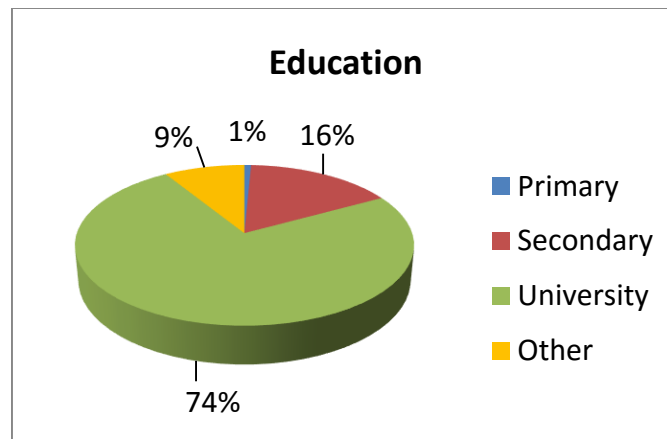




#### A.4. Education

1% of the respondents finished their education after primary school and 16% completed a secondary education. The largest group (74%) reached the academic level. 9% attended another type of education.

\* *‘After the vocational school I attended several courses. My thinking is at the level of higher education: I have broad interests, can absorb information easily and can use it in discussions.’*

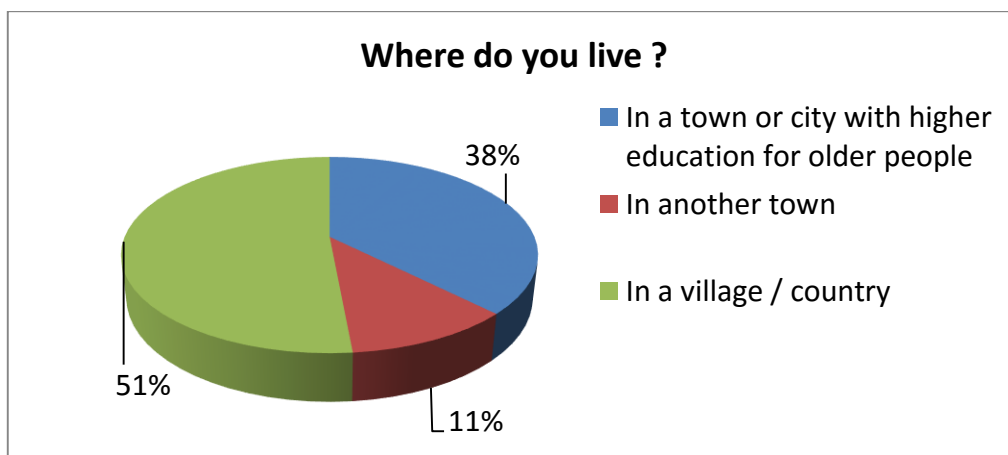


#### A.5 Area of living

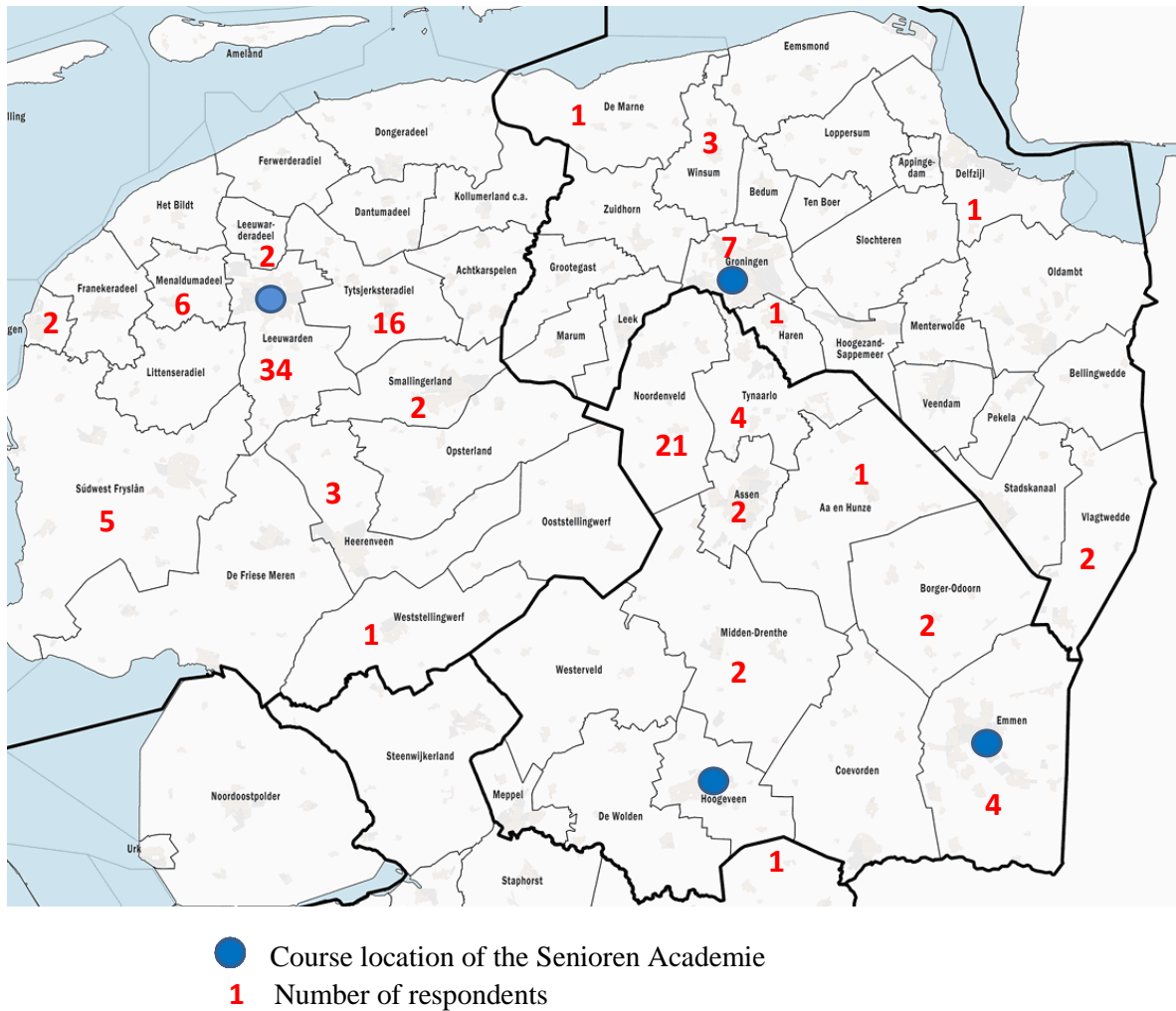
Looking at the area of living we see that 38% live in a place where higher education for older people (i.e. Senioren Academie) is available: Groningen (200.216 inh.), Leeuwarden (107.856 inh.), Hoogeveen (54.665 inh.) and Emmen (107.687 inh.).

11% live in another town and 51% live in a village.

Most of the respondents (71) live in the province of Friesland, 15 in Groningen, 36 in Drenthe and 1 in Overijssel. 12 didn't answer this question.

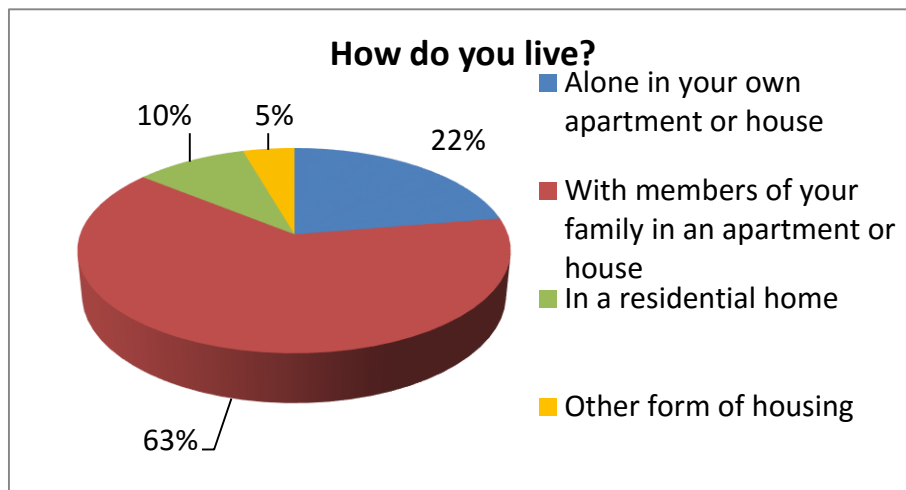


### Geographical distribution of respondents



### A.6 Housing

63% of the respondents live together with a partner or family and 22% live alone in an apartment or house. 10% lives with a group of other seniors. 5% have another form of housing.



**A.7 Do you have a physical handicap or health problem that makes it difficult for you to join learning events?**

10% of the respondents state that they have a health problem that makes it difficult for them to attend education.



## **B. Learning**

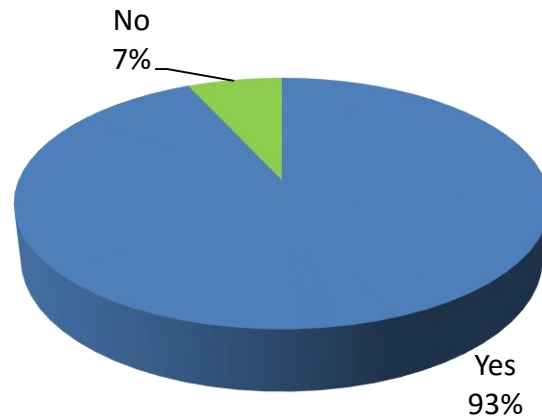
**B.1 Do you think learning in later life is important and are you interested in taking part in learning activities**

Only 7% state that learning at later age is not important. Some give an explanation. The vast majority of 93% find learning activities important.

Approximately one third of the respondents answering 'yes' give an explanation::

- Useful to keep training mentally and physically (9x mentioned)
  - \* *'Refreshes the mind, can keep up my thinking and is just fascinating.'* *'Keep off ageing as long as possible.'* *'Never too old to learn.'*
- Keep learning new things (8x)
  - \* *'Learning new things is nice and keeps you young.'* *'Now that I am retired I have the time to learn about other disciplines of science.'* *'It enriches your life.'* *'There are so many more interesting things that I would like to know more about.'*
- Keeping track in a rapidly changing society (5x)
  - \* *'Participating actively with society and keeping track of the developments.'* *'Important to stay 'in the flow.'*
- Exchange with others, distraction, social encounters (2x)
  - \* *'Exchange thoughts about subjects not restricted to merely trivial things.'*
- Further develop personal aspirations that couldn't be developed earlier because of lack of time (often in combination with other motives)
- Keep up with one's own field of science (1x)
- Useful for helping others (1x)

**Do you think learning in later life is important and are you interested in taking part in learning activities?**



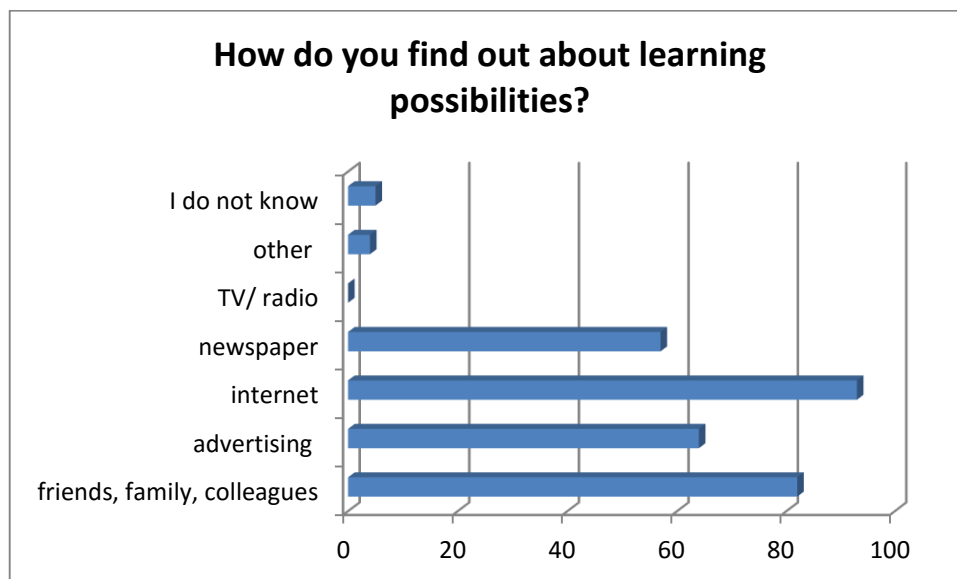
**B.2 How and where do you find out about learning possibilities?**

We looked at the sources that potential participants can use to inform themselves about the education on offer. This is information that people over 50 either collect consciously, receive without asking or get via personal contacts. Multiple choices were allowed.

The 305 choices that were made can be summarised as follows:

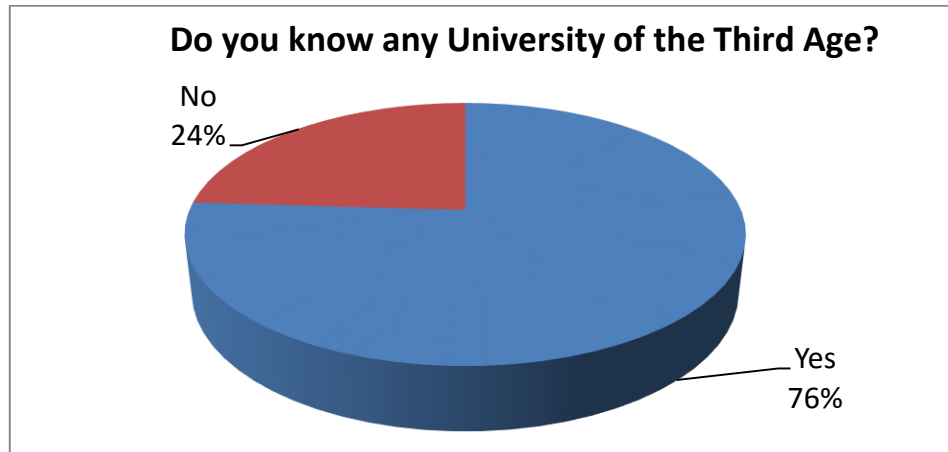
- 82 respondents get the information from people in their immediate surrounding: friends, family and colleagues
- 64 refer to advertisements in printed media
- 93 inform themselves via the internet
- 57 get the information from articles in newspapers
- tv/radio was mentioned by none of the respondents.

**How do you find out about learning possibilities?**



### B.3 Do you know any University of the Third Age?

76% of the respondents have heard of the Senioren Academie Groningen-Friesland-Drenthe, the University of the Third Age in the Northern three provinces of the Netherlands.



### B.4 Which other learning activities for the over 50s in your region are you familiar with?

81 respondents (62%) answered this and named various learning facilities in the region. 31 (24 %) answered with none/not applicable, 18 (14 %) with blank.

Learning facilities mentioned:

- Local welfare organisations: counselling, lectures and courses
- Social Cultural Work: courses, knowledge-café, Seniorweb and workshops in community centres
- Libraries and similar institutions (Fryske Academie, Treosar): gathering knowledge, education
- Open University, 'Volksuniversiteit', 'Vrije Academie': language courses, culture and hobbies
- University of applied sciences, University Groningen, Senioren Academie, Studium Generale: education of a higher level
- Local societies for e.g. women, history; service clubs: excursions, exchange of ideas on as variety of interesting subjects
- Art centres, nature societies: knowledge and experience of art, music and nature
- Churches: theological and evangelical education

### B.5 Which of these learning activities would be suitable for you?

60% of the answers to question B.4 were further specified here.

Three categories can be distinguished:

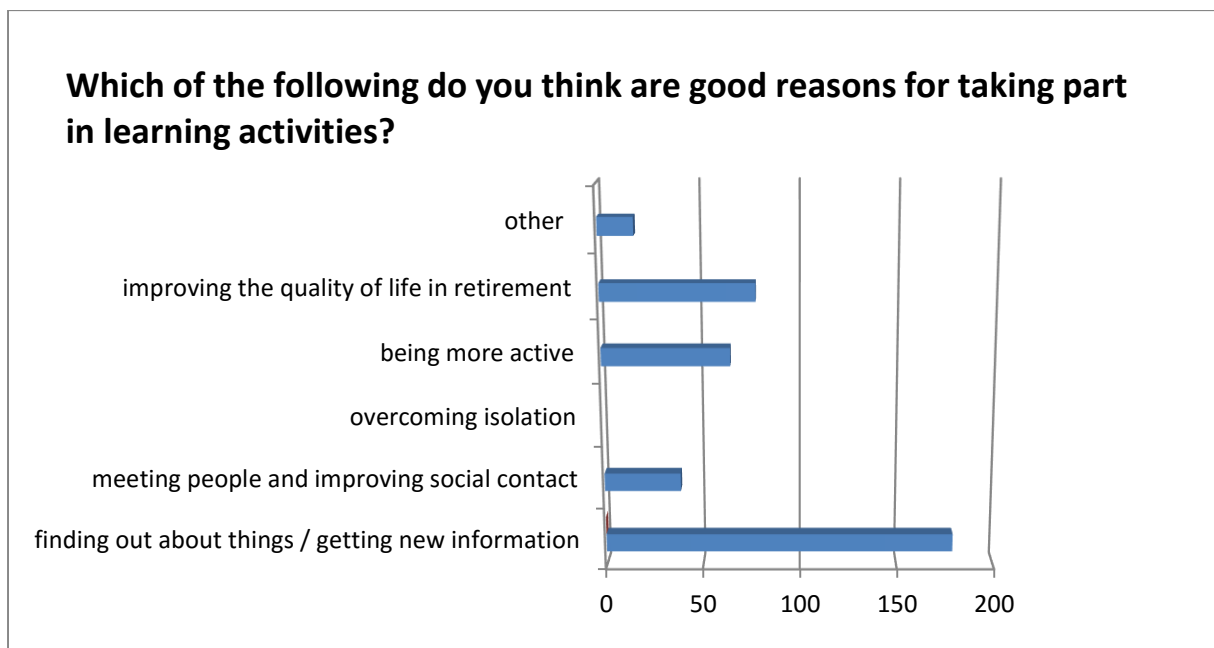
- interested in everything, if easily accessible (23x)
- interested in everything, if on an appropriate level (16x)

- specific subjects like photography, practical activities, music, painting, computer (15x)
- \* *'I am interested in many subjects, if I don't have to travel far.'*  
*'Every subject, if presented on a higher level. I read much and often notice that courses and lectures don't offer much news.'*  
*'My choices are mainly guided by individual fulfilment.'*

### **B.6 Which of the following do you think are good reasons for taking part in learning activities?**

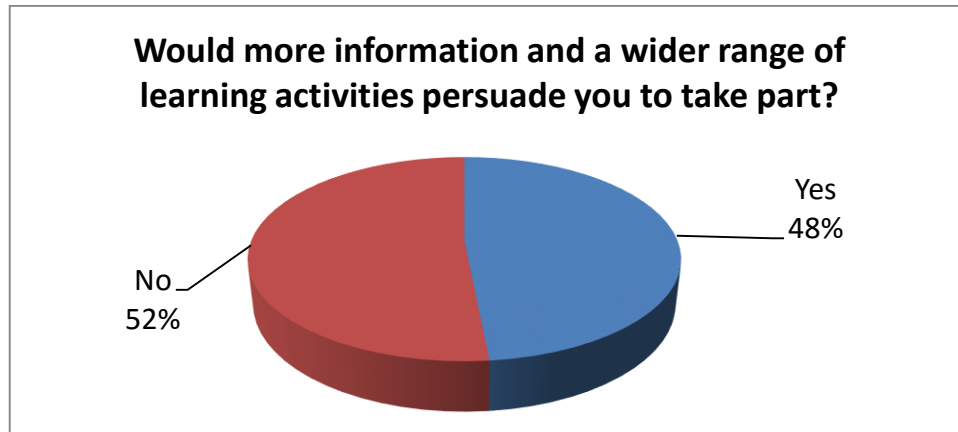
379 choices were made.

- finding out about things / getting new information 179x (47%)
- meeting people and improving social contact 39x (10%)
- overcoming isolation (not included in the list of choices)
- being more active 65x (17%)
- improving the quality of life in retirement 78x (21%)
- other 18x (5%)



### **B.7 Would more information and a wider range of learning activities persuade you to take part?**

More information and a wider range of learning activities was for a small majority (52%) no incentive to take part in education.



### B.8 If yes, which subjects would interest you?

The following subjects were mentioned:

- History (24x)
- Art(history), architecture, photography (16x)
- Philosophy (12x)
- Language and literature (10x)
- General/multidisciplinary (9x)
- Religious studies (9x)
- Music and theatre (9x)
- Social sciences (9x)
- Computer (8x)
- Medicine (7x)
- Natural science (7x)
- Physical and social geography (6x)
- Economy (3x)

- \* *'I like guided tours through exhibitions in museums'.*  
*'When the 'Fries Museum' has an activity I join in'.*  
*'I miss information about the role of (social) media and of new multimedia'.*  
*'Dutch literature has my special interest'.*

### B.9 If no, what would prevent you from taking part? (Max. 3)

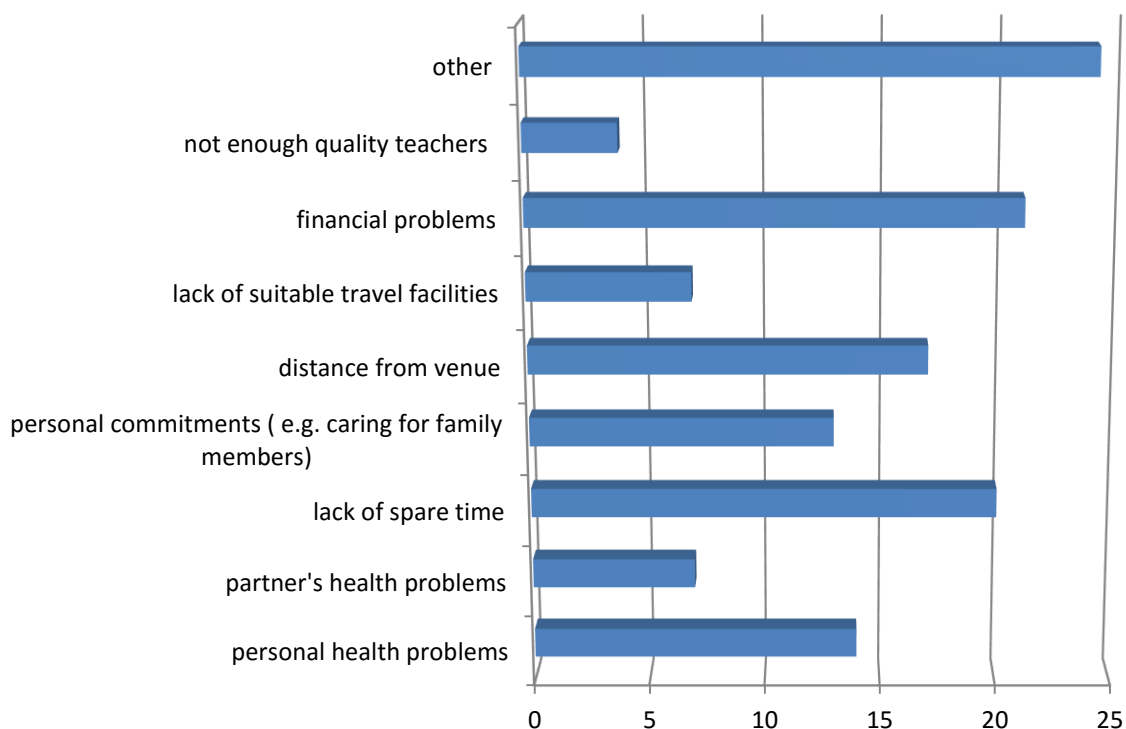
Lack of money (21x) and of spare time (20x) were the most frequent choices.

The distance from home to the location of a course or lecture (17x), personal health problems (14x) and personal commitments (13x) were also often mentioned.

Partner's health problems (7x), lack of suitable travel facilities (7x) and the quality of teachers (4x) were least frequently chosen.

- \* *'It is not because of the Senioren Academie's programme, but I am strongly engaged in charitable work.'*  
*'I am often on vacation and in between I like to stay at home.'*  
*'I have bad hearing, this is a handicap for lots of activities.'*  
*'I use a wheelchair and the world is full of thresholds!'*

### If no, what would prevent you from taking part?



### B.10 Which type of education would you prefer? (max.3)

A total of 266 answers were given.

97 respondents favoured lectures. 61 chose for excursions. 58 named seminars. Less frequently chosen were discussions (37) and exercises and trainings (26).

### Which type of education would you prefer?



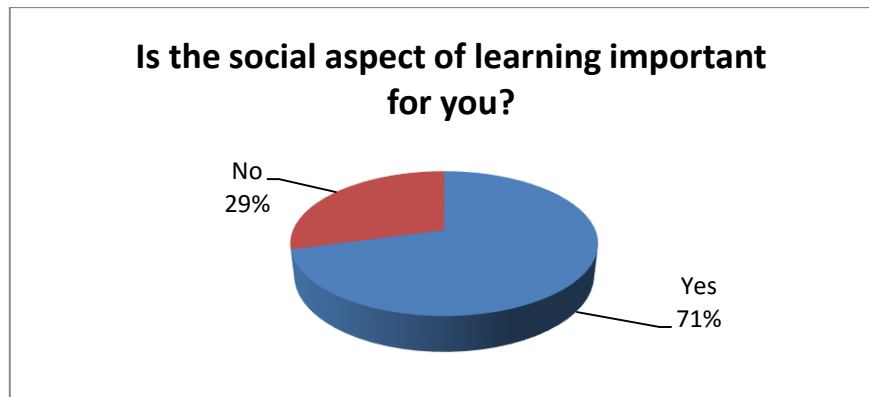


**B.11 Is the social aspect of learning important for you?**

(learning in a group in direct contact with the lecturer)

For 71% of the respondents direct contact with co-students and lecturers are important, while for 29% this doesn't play a role.

- \* *'I don't need internet' 'I like personal contacts' 'I like ostensive education' 'it is good to have to have to go out of the door for a course'.*

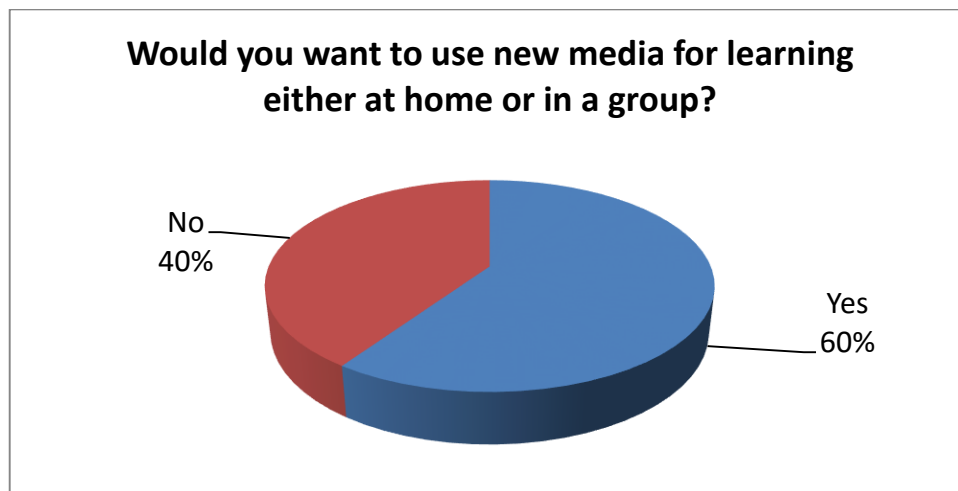
**B.12 Would you want to use new media for learning either at home or in a group?**

(e.g. courses on cd, live transmissions of lectures via internet)?

60% were open to the use of new media while 40% were not.

Thus, a majority welcomed new media in education for older people but about the way to do this, the opinions differ as the comments of the respondents demonstrate:

- \* *'New media can add something to my development.'*  
*'Education in groups together with internet support is very good for me.'*  
*'I investigate much on the internet. This expands my knowledge and insight.'*  
 and:  
 \* *'I hate sitting in front of the PC for a long time.'*  
*'I am a computer illiterate. I find it boring and impersonal.'*  
*'I find the new media definitely less pleasant than the old ones.'*



**B.13 What sort of measures do come to your mind that would make it easier for you to take part in learning?**

There were 14 suggestions mainly concerning locations, transport facilities, and specific hindrances for older people like lack of money, physical obstructions (for wheelchairs), size of groups, quality of audio equipment and duration of courses.

- \* *‘Organise bus transport between Groningen and Lauwersmeer at low cost.’*
- ‘Wheelchair-friendly locations would motivate me.’*
- ‘Smaller groups and good audio equipment make courses more inviting for people with hearing problems.’*
- ‘Locations at a central point of the province, close to public transport and with good parking facilities.’*

**B.14 If you do not take part in learning activities, what kind of free time activities do you practice/realise in your spare time? (max. 3)**

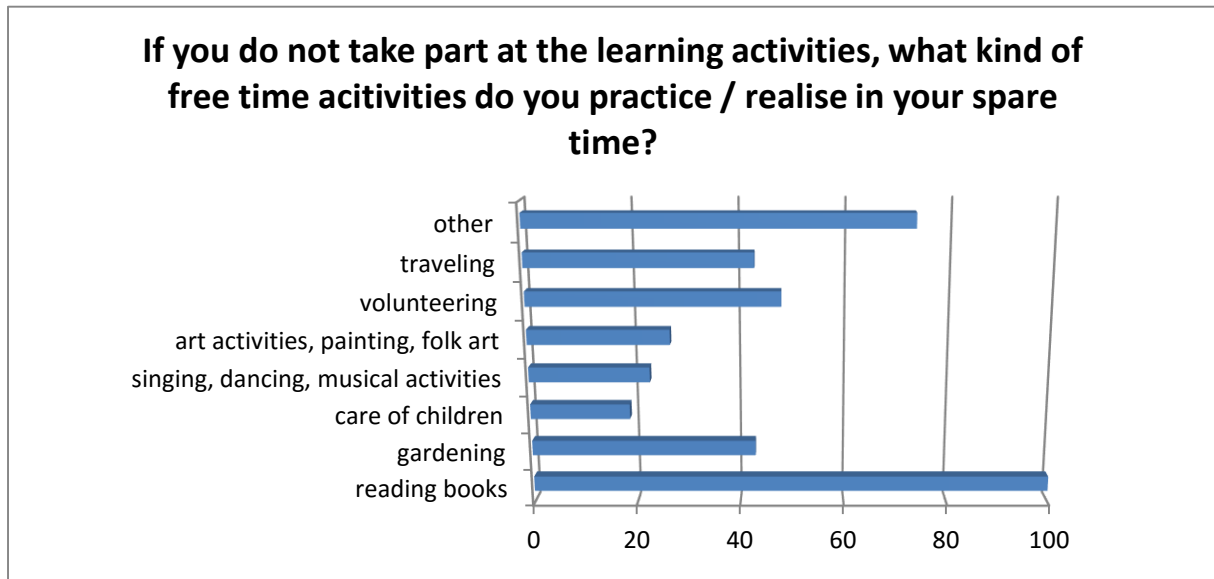
reading books	100x
volunteering	48x
gardening	43x
travelling	43x
art activities, painting, folk art	27x
singing, dancing, musical activities	23x
care of children	19x

‘Other’ was chosen 73 times, including 30 times ‘sports’.

In their comments some of the respondents gave further explanations on their various activities.

Some comments:

- \* *‘Literature group, eating group, meditation group, hiking group, living group’*
- ‘Handicraft’*
- ‘The stock exchange’*
- ‘Playing music in an orchestra’*
- ‘Internet/social media’*
- ‘Photography and editing of digital photographs by computer, composing collages and albums’*
- ‘Cycling and walking’*
- ‘Visiting grandchildren abroad and therefore much travelling’*
- ‘Theatre, exhibitions, art routes’*



## VI. CONCLUSIONS

With our target group in mind – older people with higher education whom we expect to experience some difficulties in attending educational activities - the following aspects of the collected information are noteworthy:

Financial, logistical and physical hindrances:

- The costs of educational activities is one of the major hindrances.
- The distance from home to course location is an issue for many respondents.
- One's own health or the health of the partner forms a hindrance for taking part in educational activities.

Concerning new media:

- It is surprising that none of the respondents has stated, not to be able to use a computer.
- A small number of respondents state to have an aversion against working with a computer.
- A great number stands open for the use of new media in support of education. But a considerable number of respondents appreciate the social aspects of learning and the contacts with co-students.

Concerning free time:

- Obligations within the family withhold a considerable number of respondents from taking part in education.
- Education must compete with a multitude of other activities on offer.

And finally:

- Many people over 50 want to keep up learning to cope with the fast development of the society.
- The awareness level of the Senioren Academie could be higher, considering that about a quarter of the respondents are former students and know the institution per definition. .

The aim of the EduSenNet project is to formulate recommendations for the stimulation of people over 50 to keep up learning and to take part in educational activities. For this purpose the collected information will be further analysed in phase 3 of the project..