The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences, 2025, **80**(S2), gbaf175
https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaf175
Supplement: Aging Well in an Aging Society: Italy at the Forefront of Population Aging:
Research Article

Education and learning for active aging: promising practices and findings from the Age-It Research Program

Vanna Boffo, PhD[1,*], Michele Bertani, PhD[2], Donatella Bramanti, PhD[3], Rabih Chattat, PhD[4], Laura Formenti, PhD[5]

[1]Department of Education, Languages, Intercultures, Literatures and Psychology (FORLILPSI), University of Florence, Florence, Italy
[2]Department of Economics, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy
[3]Department of Sociology, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy
[4]Department of Psychology "Renzo Canestrari", Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
[5]Department of Human Sciences for Education "Riccardo Massa", University of Milano Bicocca, Milan, Italy

*Address correspondence to: Vanna Boffo, PhD. E-mail: vanna.boffo@unifi.it

Decision Editor: Daniele Vignoli, PhD (Social Sciences Section)

Abstract

Objectives: This study maps "promising practices" across a range of organizations that support older adults' participation and learning to develop an evidence base for relevant policies and programs. It presents findings from the Learning, Education, and Active Aging Board of the Age-It Research Program.

Methods: This mixed-methods study, following a sequential explanatory design, gathered quantitative data via a questionnaire, completed by public and private organizations active in offering programs/activities to older adults. The questionnaire collected information about the organization profile, the target population, and the educational activity. For qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff coordinators and managers.

Results: Forty-three organizations, mostly Italian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), reported on 50 "promising practices" with a wide range of aims, consistent with the definition of lifelong and lifewide learning: social inclusion, health promotion, caregivers support, social work and volunteering, digital literacy, and intergenerational activities. Lack of coordination, low exchange between organizations, funding, and sustainability were the main weaknesses. From the analysis of qualitative data, three main topics emerged: prevention of frailty, empowerment through innovation, and participation.

Discussion: This exploratory study outlines the richness of the mapped activities, as well as limited exchange and collaboration among the involved actors, the absence of a shared framework to assess the quality of practices addressed to older adults' learning and participation, and the need for research and evaluation. Furthermore, national policies for active and healthy aging should allocate specific resources for learning and education to support older adults in terms of skills, social participation, meaning, and recognition.

Keywords: Learning, Education, Practices, Active aging

The demographic shift in high-income countries presents new learning needs related to longevity. Italy represents an interesting case, being the second country in the world with the oldest population after Japan. This paper presents findings from the Learning, Education, and Active Aging Board (LEAA), a cross-sectional committee within the Italian Age-It Research Program. For full details about the program, see Vignoli et al. (2025), and visit https://ageit.eu/wp/en/. The LEAA Board is an interdisciplinary group of scholars whose purpose is to address the educational and learning aspects of aging over the life course. The need for knowledge of the existing practices and evidence of their impact in the Italian context has inspired this exploratory study.

The very basic question of our study is: how can learning and education contribute to aging well in an aging society? Lifelong learning is a recognized key component of the Active Aging (AA) agenda (Formosa, 2019; Narushima et al., 2018). However, a systematic review of the Italian national and regional policies for AA (Barbabella et al., 2022), while recognizing the increasing attention of Italian policy makers and stakeholders (see also Barbabella et al., 2020; United Nations Economic Commission for Europe [UNECE], 2020), and signaling several emerging practices and programs for a healthy and AA, also demonstrated the persistence of significant challenges, mainly due to differences and fragmentation at institutional, policy and socio-economic levels (Principi et al., 2023; Quattrociocchi et al., 2021). Despite the presence of a national plan for AA, the main focus of policies is still on long-term care and the sustainability of the pension system (Barbabella et al., 2020). There is low awareness of education as essential to AA. Furthermore, the lifelong learning agenda in Italy is addressed by several authorities, regulated regionally, and administered by various public and private agencies, such as schools for adults (CPIA), museums, third sector organizations, employers, and citizens' associations. A common culture on adults' and older adults' learning is yet to be developed.

Received: February 19 2025; Accepted: August 27 2025

This interdisciplinary study on older adults' education and learning in Italy addresses, for the first time, the practices and projects aiming at supporting individuals and communities in later life. It brings a substantial contribution to the goals of the LEAA Board and to the broader Age-It Research Program by building evidence about the existence, quality, and possible evolution of the educational practices that are devoted to incorporating lifelong learning more coherently and effectively in the AA agenda. This not only applies to the Italian context but also can be relevant for countries facing similar challenges.

Learning is ubiquitous in the experience of growing older, since individuals are called to adapt, to make choices and changes to keep their life as good as possible, to prevent illness and frailty, but also to keep a sense of identity, value, and meaning. They must learn to take care of themselves, as well as of others and their environment, and how to bring their valuable contribution to their communities under new circumstances. In this regard, lifelong learning goes beyond mere "educational needs" or individual efforts of adaptation, to involve a wide range of actions and experiences related to this phase of life. Many and diverse practices are relevant if we look at learning from action and experience (informal learning). Many of these practices are usually framed as social interventions and approached in general and quantitative terms. An evaluation of the implemented actions, their quality, and learning effects is far from being achieved.

The LEAA Board's work is a first endeavor to map what we call "promising practices," a common concept in research on education, medicine, and social intervention that refers to effective and satisfying measures or actions carried out in real life but implemented on too small a scale and not fully evaluated (Bazant et al., 2022). A better knowledge of promising practices may inspire research, policies, and organizations to upgrade the quality, effectiveness, coherence, and sustainability of programs and actions, locally and in the larger system. This study considered self-reported projects, implemented by a range of different organizations, explicitly related to the AA agenda and its principles. They connect individual learning with community work, sustainable citizenship, inclusion, and well-being.

The literature on AA, based on the Nine Principles of AA (International Council on Active Ageing [ICAA], 2019; United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2019) and the four pillars of the AA Index (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2021), clearly states the relevance of education and learning in promoting older adults' capabilities and well-being (Boffo, 2006, 2022). Education is here defined in the broader sense, not only as the provision of courses based on interesting content (as done by Third Age Universities or cultural agencies, see Formosa, 2019), certification (e.g., higher education courses for older students), or specific skills (e.g., digital literacy courses). As stated by Dewey (2024) and pursued by educational gerontology since its foundation (Peterson, 1976), education is the complex set of biological, cultural, and learning processes that form and transform the human subject all along the life course. It is lifelong and lifewide, encompassing experiences such as dealing with a longer life and its meaning (Withnall, 2009), participating to public action, preparing for the future and making difficult choices, facing frailty, developing new skills and identities (Findsen & Formosa, 2012), taking care of oneself, and overcome social isolation and loneliness through engagement and participation.

This large definition entails a responsibility of public and private organizations to support older citizens in participating and building knowledge, attitudes, and skills not only devoted to guaranteeing a healthy and active life, but also personal and collective growth. This entails fostering learning of younger and older adults, professionals, volunteers, family caregivers, helpers, and policymakers (Sala et al., 2020). Participation in education is not a merely individual choice; it depends on social and relational factors (Bjursell, 2019). Proximal and larger systems are called to develop awareness, methods, and strategies to face the challenges of longevity and support well-being and participation, especially of the most marginal and vulnerable.

From these assumptions, an interdisciplinary exploratory study has been designed to map the promising practices and programs devoted to older adults' learning, training, and participation in formal, non-formal, and informal learning contexts. The research questions were:

> *How are these practices described in terms of planning, organization, targets, objectives, methods, and expected results? What models and theories, values, and representations are conveyed, how are older adults represented?*

The research targets educational practices focused on AA, implemented by different agencies and involving older adults, professionals, volunteers, family caregivers, and other stakeholders. Their design and implementation convey values, presuppositions, and representations of older adults.

Education and learning in later life: exploring the practices

How are models and theories of education and learning in later life translated into practices? Common sense representations and ageism hinder full understanding of older adults as lifelong learners. Later life is a complex phenomenon, influenced by biographical, relational, social, and cultural factors. Interdisciplinarity (McMurtry & Sasser, 2020) allows, in this study, to overcome a limited representation of older adults as "patients" or "service consumers" and consider them as whole persons situated in time and space, shaped and shaping an evolving historical, political, and socio-cultural context. In this regard, educational gerontology (Glendenning, 2000; Hachem, 2023; Peterson, 1976), an interdisciplinary subfield of Adult Education and Learning (AEL), carries on a deep and thick awareness of the role of learning in later life by interconnecting education, sociology, philosophy, psychology, and political and critical studies. Educational gerontology "is fundamentally concerned about how people age throughout the life course and how learning/education intersects with living" (Findsen, 2018, p. 839); in this respect, critical educational gerontology and critical geragogy (Formosa, 2012, 2018) invite to reflect on the context provided for older adults' learning, and how programs could be planned and managed to guarantee true participation and respect for older adults' real features, dignity, desires, and interests. Since learning starts from lived experience, the providers of education should reflect on who their participants are and which experience is best suited to support their active participation, engagement, and meaning.

Emancipatory education, transformative learning, and transitions (Kern & Schmidt-Hertha, 2023) highlight the learning process, triggered by new expected and unexpected events and experiences that push older adults to revise their previous ways of doing and thinking, identities, and life choices, for better or worse. Learning in later life is shaped by gender, age, class,

ethnicity, migration, work, level of education, and also by the subject's capacity for self-positioning and reflexivity. It is different from adult learning: andragogy (Knowles, 1990) and lifelong learning (Field & Leicester, 2003) reclaim adults' capacity to learn on their own terms. However, lifelong learning (Withnall, 2006, 2009) requires new frameworks and policies that recognize the specific experience of aging, e.g., in regard to coping with vulnerability, building a new identity after retirement, creating new boundaries and meanings, and maintaining agency.

Older adults' representation has changed in educational gerontology; Hachem (2020) identifies four narratives: a first one, based on critical emancipatory pedagogy, depicted older adults as potentially powerless, oppressed, and naïve. A following narrative, based on positive psychology and andragogy, optimistically assumed that older adults can aim at self-actualization, having fewer responsibilities and more leisure time. A third more recent narrative recognizes older adults' diversity based on structural determinants like gender, class, ethnicity, education, etc. Hachem (2020, 2023) suggests that critical social theory combined with identity-based transformative learning (Illeris, 2014; Mezirow, 2018) supports a fourth narrative of older adults as a heterogeneous group with multifaceted identities and unprecedented levels of agency, but also high risks of being silenced and marginalized.

From the above, educational practices are designed and performed with different aims, features, and outcomes. They can be aimed at inclusion, emancipation, well-being, and creativity, besides health and prevention. They can involve older adults as self-directed learners, or experts and partners, hence constructing them as powerful and capable. Practices can recognize a wide range of needs and desires, avoiding standard answers, personalizing paths, and enabling older adults to position themselves actively in relation to the context, to others, and their own identity, to establish priorities, and make self-directed choices. Besides, they can fuel reflexivity, knowledge, and identity, not to suppress the Big Questions of the last phase of life (Formenti & West, 2018). When new events start a transition, challenging previous adaptation, older adults can transform or withdraw (Bischoff et al., 2021), adapt or grow, find an alternative answer, or resist; or, more often than not, a combination of these different strategies (Wildemeersch & Stroobants, 2018). So, reflexive participatory practices, leveraging autobiographical memory and sharing (Formenti, 2018), can create meaningful connections between self and context, and support the individual capacity to cope and to influence the environment in some measure. Education has many ways to promote "aging with optimism" and fight ageism (McGuire, 2017).

However, learning is conceived as a possibility at best for the "third age" (Laslett, 1991), excluding the oldest and most vulnerable. We should "avoid false generalizations or myths around older people's potentiality, including their access to educational opportunity" (Findsen, 2018, p. 842). All older adults can make a relevant contribution to society in many ways. They can take care of themselves, others, and the environment; they work for the community in volunteering, political participation, and sharing their knowledge, skills, and memories with others. This contribution needs to be recognized, valued, and fueled by policies and practices at all levels: micro, meso, and macro. The dominant approach to older adults' education is based on individual learning, framed within a perspective of "successful aging" (Teater & Chonody, 2020), activity theory, and intervention aimed at supporting coping, preventing illness, or acquiring desirable skills. Third Age Universities, an example of positive action for older adults' learning, see the participation of a self-selected audience of individuals endowed with some cultural, social, and economic capital. This can be a limit of the individual(istic) approach.

At the meso level, learning is an emerging feature of certain relationships, interactions, and contexts that offer possibilities, recognition, emotional support, and a feeling of belonging. Practices produce different effects if they involve older adults as users, as active participants, or experts in the design, provision, and evaluation of activities. In this regard, the creation of collective identities (e.g., a team, a choir, a dance group, an association) produces feelings of togetherness, connection, and appropriation of the public space (Zhu & Li, 2021).

At the macro level, interrogating the practices and mainstreaming learning in later life would challenge the dominant culture that conveys subtle forms of ageism, stereotypes, discrimination, and marginalization. In their design and implementation, educational practices convey explicit and implicit definitions, expectations, and narratives that shape the conditions for the real implementation and success of the AA agenda. Mapping and interrogating the practices is a needed part of this agenda.

Methodology

Our research aimed to contribute to the development of a preliminary set of insights relevant to policymakers and providers related to services and programs to support older adults' learning. To reach this aim, we conducted a mixed-methods study to collect and analyze activities and programs for older adults' learning, training, education, and social participation. We adopted a sequential exploratory design, implementing a quantitative data collection phase, using a questionnaire, followed by a deepening qualitative phase, using semi-structured interviews to expand on quantitative findings. In concurrent triangulation design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Ivankova et al., 2006), we validated the findings generated by each method through evidence produced by the other.

The two phases of the study included: (1) Italian public and private organizations offering educational activities and services in the field of AA; and (2) staff operating in the same context. Purposive sampling was employed to achieve a balanced representation of the Italian macro-regions (North, Center, South/Islands) and types of actors (public administration, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], and firms).

Data collection

In the quantitative phase, a questionnaire was sent out to the stakeholders in the Age-It Research Program.[1] It consisted of 47 items regarding practices of education and AA. Main topics were: organization profile; target population; type of educational activity; teaching methodology; and critical issues emerging in implementation. In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews with managerial staff, such as coordinators or supervisors, explored in more detail the practices and context, the explicit and implicit representations and presuppositions entailed by the projects—their lights and shadows. The participants agreed voluntarily to participate and signed informed consent.

Data analysis

Data collected via the questionnaire were analyzed to produce descriptive statistics. Textual data from the interviews were separately and iteratively analyzed by the interdisciplinary team following a hermeneutic approach (Ghiglione et al., 1980) to enable a rich and sophisticated reading of the textual corpus. Uncertainties were resolved through discussion with two teams of researchers. The analyzed material was then organized into thematic areas by identifying *isomorphisms* (groups of textual elements characterized by a relationship of identity) or *isotopies* (certain consistent parts within the considered units). Finally, after gathering all the useful elements, a general table was created, summarizing different aspects, types of intervention, and thematic areas. The analysis allowed the identification of different categories of needs addressed by the practices, their operational strategies, and three prevalent profiles of promising practices.

Results

Organizations surveyed

Forty-three organizations completed the questionnaire, resulting in the collection of 50 promising practices. The main results are summarized in Table 1.

NGOs are the prevailing type of organization involved. Most projects are intergenerational and/or targeted at older women. The geographical distribution (Figure 1) confirms results from previous projects regarding the fragmentation and uneven implementation of the AA agenda in different regions (Principi et al., 2023; Quattrociocchi et al., 2021).

Area of intervention

This question had nine options: (1) Fighting loneliness and social exclusion; (2) Health prevention/promotion of autonomy, mobility, and physical abilities; (3) Support to caregivers; (4) Social work and volunteering; (5) Social and intergenerational housing; (6) Computer and digital skills; (7) Tourism and culture; (8) Cohesion between generations; (9) Spiritual, existential, and religious. The results (Table 2) show a predominance of actions devoted to contrast isolation (#1) and to foster digital skills (#6) in public administration, while NGOs also target #1, together with intergenerational cohesion (#8). Firms target caregivers (#3) and housing (#5) more often than other stakeholders.

The questionnaire also included five open-ended questions exploring difficulties encountered by the organization in implementing the practices. Textual analysis highlighted *general* and *specific* weaknesses. The former concerned the lack of coordination and scarce exchange of information among stakeholders involved in similar projects in the same area; as a consequence, overlap between projects reduces efficiency in using human and financial resources. The *specific* weaknesses depend on many factors, such as the type of provider; for example, a shortage of volunteers in NGOs makes some activities unsustainable. Other critical points were the uncertainty/discontinuity of funding and excessive bureaucracy.

Semi-structured interviews

Based on the heterogeneity of organizations and practices identified by the questionnaire, the qualitative part of the study used data from the questionnaire (Table 1) to pursue maximum

Table 1. The 50 practices at a glance.

Question	Results	Commentary
Geographical area (n)	• Northern: 23 • Central: 21 • Southern and islands: 6	A similar number of practices were signaled from Northern and Central Italy, while fewer were in the South and the islands.
Type of organization (n)	• Public administration: 13 • Firms: 7 • NGOs: 30	Data came predominantly from NGOs.
Beneficiary target age (years)	• Public administration: 70–79 • Firms: 50–69 • NGOs: 70–79	As expected, firms engage older workers, while the beneficiaries of public administration and NGOs are older (pensioners).
Participants per project/activity (mean)	• Public administration: 250 • Firms: 100 • NGOs: 100	Public administrations have larger numbers of participants.
Intergenerational project/total number (n)	• Public administration: 8 of 9 • Firms: 4 of 5 • NGOs: 18 of 30	Most activities are intergenerational.
Project or activity targeted at women (n)	• Public administration: 7 of 12 • Firms: 1 of 5 • NGOs: 23 of 27	Women are a relevant target in many practices.
Learning themes	Main macro themes: • Health and well-being • Culture (museums, painting, choir…) • Digitalization	Wealth of programs are on offer.
Didactic methods (n) **[total=43]**	• Participatory: 18 • Laboratory: 12 • Interactive: 5 • Others (mixed, frontal): 8	Participatory methods prevail.

Note. NGOs = non-governmental organizations.

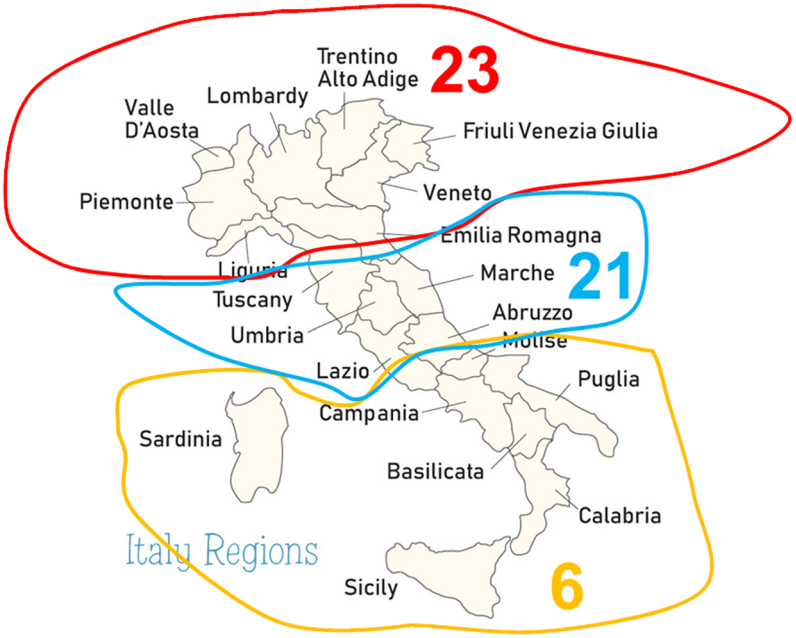

Figure 1. Number of promising practices collected, divided by macro-geographical areas. North (red), Center (blue), South (yellow).

Table 2. Areas of intervention by organization type.

Areas of intervention	Public administration (n=39)	Firms (n=40)	NGOs (n=80)
1. Isolation exclusion	28.2%	15.0%	27.5%
2. Health, prevention	15.4%	15.0%	11.3%
3. Care givers	7.7%	15.0%	8.8%
4. Social workers/ volunteers	2.6%	12.5%	13.8%
5. Housing	5.1%	12.5%	3.8%
6. Digital skills	20.5%	10.0%	11.3%
7. Tourism culture	7.7%	7.5%	1.3%
8. Intergenerational cohesion	10.3%	10.0%	20.0%
9. Spiritual	2.6%	2.5%	2.5%

Note. NGOs = non-governmental organizations.

internal differentiation in our sample regarding the type of organization (public administration, NGOs, and private companies), dimensions (small, medium, large), and geographical area. Hence, 13 organizations were selected. They cover a variety of targets, from active and frail older adults to family and/or professional caregivers and workers, to intergenerational audiences. The analysis focused on the research questions: *How are these practices described in terms of planning, organization, targets, objectives, methods, and expected results? What models and theories, values, and representations are conveyed, how are older adults represented?*

In the interviews, specific attention was brought to:

a. The definition of needs related to aging, and how these practices address them;
b. The involvement of the beneficiaries as active participants and the extent of their contribution;
c. The role of monitoring and evaluation in the design and implementation of the practice.

Qualitative analysis of the transcribed interviews identified three profiles of promising practices, each integrating different user categories, needs, and methodologies: (1) practices to prevent frailty; (2) practices of empowerment through knowledge; (3) practices of empowerment through participation (Table 3).

Profile 1: Prevention of frailty

Five practices—SonoraMente and Gruppo Anchise (Milan), Anteas (Venice), Biodanza (Oristano), and AttivaMENTE (Florence)—aim at responding to psychological, emotional, and socio-relational needs, with a primary interest in improving older adults' quality of life and preventing physical, cognitive, or social fragility. They create an inclusive and supportive environment for the participants through activities that enhance relationships, participation, beauty, and meaning. Older adults are seen as users and represented as potentially vulnerable. They receive a service, under the responsibility of a professional or volunteer, hence the quality of their experience depends on their capacity and attitude. Long-term sustainability and real accessibility of this practice depend on financial and human resources.

Profile 2: empowerment through knowledge

Five practices—Older Adults' Rights Association (Venice and Prato), Meridiana Social Solidarity Cooperative (Monza), University for People of All Ages (Florence), AUSER Active Aging (Tuscany)—promote older adults' voice and awareness of their capacity by engaging them in new community actions, with an emphasis on finding solutions to problems and using technology to improve the quality of life. Social inclusion through digital literacy is a key aspect of these programs. AA is realized involving and training older adults as experts, hence creating

Table 3. Summary of semi-structured interviews.

Profile	Main objectives	Activity characteristics	Representation of older adults	Main challenges
1. Prevention of frailty	Improve quality of life; prevent physical, cognitive, and social frailty	Socio-relational and expressive activities; inclusive and supportive environment	Older adults seen as vulnerable users, recipients of services	Dependence on financial and human resources; limited long-term sustainability
2. Empowerment through knowledge	Promote awareness and capabilities; foster digital inclusion and community-based actions	Digital literacy, workshops, peer learning; older adults involved as experts and agents of change	Older adults as knowledge bearers and community resources	Difficulties integrating digital tools; cultural resistance; need for shared learning spaces
3. Empowerment through participation	Promote lifelong learning, active citizenship, and intergenerational collaboration	Educational and volunteering opportunities; informal, non-formal, and formal learning paths	Older adults as active citizens eager to contribute	Motivational and cultural barriers, limited access, mobility difficulties, lack of systematic evaluation

Note. Profiles of the practices.

community spaces for mutual learning and exchange. A challenge can be the integration of digital technologies with existing practices, which is also due to resistance from some older adults.

Profile 3: empowerment through participation

Three practices/programs–University for All Ages (Rende, Cosenza), Third-Sector National Forum (Rome), Nestore Association (Milan)–are more explicitly devoted to promoting lifelong learning and active citizenship through educational and volunteering opportunities that stimulate older adults' participation in society, boosting their sense of achievement and belonging. These practices may involve informal, non-formal, and formal learning, as well as a wider concept of AA based on intergenerational collaboration. A limit of these practices can be the lack of interest or motivation to participate among some older adults, so it is essential to create attractive and accessible programs, and to address difficulties and obstacles due to communication deficits, low cultural capital, some older adults' habitus to stay at home, objective difficulties in mobility, and fear of failure. A challenge is the systematic monitoring of impact and evaluation.

Cross-sectional analysis of all the cases reveals several aspects of what could be classified as examples of promising practices. As said, learning in later life presents distinctive characteristics that require an educational approach capable of valuing the wealth of experience accumulated over a lifetime, hence recognizing prior skills, individual expectations, and contextual conditions. Another key aspect is flexibility, to avoid the risk of reproducing instructional models that clash with the cognitive, emotional, and biographical characteristics of the learners. Emphasis on experiential learning plays a central role: in most projects, where knowledge and skills are shared and constructed based on personal experience, and with a practical rather than theoretical approach.

Some critical issues are also signaled. Accessibility can be problematic for some older adults; removing physical and technological barriers is relevant, but not enough; creating welcoming learning environments entails consideration of emotional and motivational hindrances (Hoge et al., 2005). Learning is not neutral; it is always situated within a relational context that shapes its process and outcomes. Hence, the quality of social relationships is a key element of effective educational practices for older adults. Some practices are unable to reach or retain those who might benefit from them.

If we consider reproducibility and transferability, the examined practices appear closely tied to their context and to exceptional circumstances (e.g., relevant material and human resources, skills, a supporting community, and funding), which seem difficult to replicate except for a few exemplary cases, such as the University for All Ages. In the face of these challenges, networking, dialogue, and partnership among stakeholders could enhance the development of high-quality initiatives on a larger scale.

Besides this, the three profiles of promising practices highlight fundamental needs that must be addressed to improve older adults' quality of life and to promote a more inclusive and supportive environment. The dynamics of access in the three categories show that projects focusing on prevention are more immediately perceived as significant by individuals and organizations since they confirm the dominant narrative of older adults as users, consumers, or beneficiaries of services. The second and third profiles address a broader range of needs and interests that are quite relevant to well-being and self-worth, but require older adults to become aware and choose to participate. A large segment of the older population struggles to engage in these activities due to cultural, social, or economic reasons. These practices address more complex needs, including psychological, emotional, and relational support in the form of companionship and meaningful human relationships to counteract solitude and isolation. The representation of aging in these projects recognizes personal identity beyond illness or other vulnerabilities and aims to preserve dignity and autonomy. Another fundamental need is social inclusion and appreciation of older adults as active community members, a concept supported by the AA agenda (World Health Organization, 2002). Practical and relational support in coping with everyday difficulties, including dealing with bureaucracy and digitized services, is also crucial to guarantee access to information and services. The second profile promotes AA through digital skills and using technology to access services. Lifelong learning and active citizenship are essential to maintain a sense of achievement and belonging. The third profile addresses this need through the acquisition of new skills via courses and workshops, as well as volunteering, by which older adults enhance a sense of participation and involvement in the community.

In summary, the identified practices highlight the value of an integrated approach to address the complexity and plurality

of older adults' needs, interests, and desires. Long-term sustainability, training, accessibility and inclusiveness, monitoring, and evaluation are key aspects that must be addressed to maximize the effectiveness of these practices and ensure significant improvements.

Data integration (quantitative and qualitative)

Quantitative and qualitative results have been compared following the perspective of *simultaneous integration* (Morse & Niehaus, 2009), leveraging on the interdisciplinary composition of the research group to read data in a pluralistic and critical way, and to identify features that characterize promising practices as such. This enabled a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the collected practices, illuminating key features and providing a critical, holistic framework that encompasses the complexity, meaning, representations, and hidden pedagogies conveyed in each analyzed practice. From the comparison, four major aspects emerged among the others (Table 4):

1. The role of public institutions in shaping, facilitating, or limiting practices by funding the programs;
2. The relevance, as well as nature, scope, and creation process, of stakeholders' networks;
3. A dynamic and wide representation of learning areas and topics; and
4. An implicit pedagogy in teaching and learning methods.

The qualitative findings expanded our understanding of what it means to depend on public funding, particularly for NGOs; participation in public calls reduces flexibility; besides, bureaucracy and financial requirements create unsustainable extra work for NGOs. The relevance of stakeholders' networks as a key feature in promising practices is also confirmed by qualitative data: interviews clarified how networks enable information exchange and collaboration, reducing fragmentation and waste of resources, and expanding the projects' potential to change the larger culture of AA. The variety of courses and activities in the explored practices is large. While quantitative

Table 4. Relevant aspects of the analyzed promising practices.

Major topics	Quantitative results	Qualitative results	Comparison
1. Role of public institutions	Funding: 27 of 50 projects (54% of the total) were funded, totally or partially, by public institutions	Bureaucratic burden: "*We are literally brought to our knees by bureaucracy.*" (ADA Venice) "*Two years ago we had a proposal ready [but] we didn't submit it because […] it required a 70% bank guarantee.*" (Nestore, Milan) "*At the beginning, courses were recognized by the Ministry, but we had to pay 1,000 euros for this, so we no longer make them accredited.*" (Gruppo Anchise, Milan)	Expansion of understanding: application for funding shapes the activities, their objectives, contents, and meaning; it is time-consuming and requires specific skills. Besides, it makes very difficult for small NGOs and associations to participate.
2. Stakeholders' networks	Partnerships: 37 out of 50 projects (74% of the total) were done in partnership with other stakeholders	Opening new paths of intervention locally through partnerships: "*We carry out small-scale projects both at a regional and national level, for example, now we are doing one… with the Ministry of Labor. The focus is on protected beaches for disabled people.*" (ADA, Prato) "*The project that we took to FIERIDA [a bottom-up national conference organised by providers of adult learning and education] paved the way to other experiences in other regions.*" (CPIA 4, Oristano) "*Italy is big but you can find us in every region, especially in Lombardy and Emilia, where most of our trainers are located. Our goal is to influence culture through courses, websites, and publications.*" (Gruppo Anchise, Milan)	Confirmation of the relevance of networking; clues about the process, and how to enhance the possibility to scale up the activities.
3. Learning areas and topics	Broad range of themes: Projects are mainly focused on "Health and wellness," "Cultural activities and socialization" and "Digitalization"; but all areas are represented.	A large variety of topics and languages: "*We basically work with music; we started… with a choir. So, we have two types of intervention, the choir, which is very well established (it was set up in 2016). Then we have the work on dance. Then we have the vegetable garden, yes, the vegetable garden too.*" (Sonoramente, Milan)	Expanded knowledge, more details on the activities; the variety of languages and topics allows for a richer offer of experiences and a proposal that adapts to emerging needs and possibilities.
4. Teaching and learning methods	Participatory methods: Different methods are implemented in the practices. The most frequent method is participatory (18 of 43)	Hidden pedagogy: "*Our training groups are centered around language, using a methodology that allows us to speak directly with the older person. Our approach reaches out to the older people, addresses them, and starts from them. [this] methodology… is the result of studying many interviews with older people*" (Gruppo Anchise, Milan)	Confirmation of the importance of a participatory pedagogy. Interviews collected more details about this pedagogy (e.g., the need to address older adults in their own language).

Note. ADA = Older Adults' Rights Association; CPIA = Provincial Center for Adult Education; FIERIDA = National Conference of Italian Adult Education Network; NGO = Non Governmental Organization.

data focus on macro areas, interviews highlight details, the meaning of specific activities, and how they developed in time. Regarding teaching and learning methods, there was a clear convergence in quantitative and qualitative data in favor of active and learner-centered methods, implementing adult education strategies that take into account the participants' needs, abilities, interests, background, and experience. Participatory methods are deemed the most appropriate.

Discussion

This study used a mixed-methods design to explore promising practices and activities aimed at promoting learning and education for AA in different contexts. The results outlined different organizations involved in these activities, including public administration, firms, and NGOs. This exploratory mapping shows a low level of exchange and collaboration between different agencies and the absence of a shared framework for practices. The differences in methods, objectives, and activities implemented by the organizations involved in the study make for a rich but fragmented system that would take advantage of centralized information, clearer policies, and research to promote best practices based on rigorous assessment of output and impact.

A national strategy on learning in later life, as a specific dimension of lifelong learning and AA, is needed to raise awareness among the public of the importance of learning and education for human well-being, and the need for citizens' active participation in co-designing activities to meet different needs and profiles. Interdisciplinary research can build an integrative framework to guide, monitor, and adapt interventions to different contexts and targets. A critical aspect concerns management and funding, which are essential for the success, continuity, and expansion of the activities beyond local boundaries, but can limit the scope of activities and bring a burden on local and smaller organizations.

The explored practices involve citizens of all ages, in line with a life course perspective that promotes healthy aging since childhood, pursuing care and self-care, digital knowledge and skills to navigate the world of services, participation and engagement, but also new knowledge, cultural interests, and leisure activities. Participatory activities, where older adults play an active role or are the promoters, are especially useful to develop or maintain personal growth and prevent solitude. Promising practices promote adaptation and learning in changing conditions (Baltes et al., 1980; Erikson et al., 1986), balancing losses and gains, nurturing awareness, and developing strategies to cope. This needs resources for learning and education, easily accessible in the community, and a new narrative of older adults as whole persons.

Our study also has several limitations. The convenience sampling method (online invitation to Age-It Research Program stakeholders) limited the number of respondents, so our mapping is partial. Despite this, the study offers important insights into the variety of practices, contexts, needs, general and specific goals and contents, methods, and tools. More knowledge is needed to inform the practices, suggest improvements, and offer recommendations to policymakers on how to reduce fragmentation and combine efforts in a national collaborative plan.

Conclusion

This first exploratory study aimed at gathering insights for future research and research-based policies, services, and programs for education and lifelong learning in the AA agenda. The interdisciplinary composition of the LEAA Board has led to a rich, nuanced, and critical perspective on learning in later

Table 5. Key areas to improve lifelong learning for the active aging agenda in Italy.

Key area	Suggested actions
National and local strategy	Establishment of an intersectoral steering committee to draw a strategy and national plan for learning and active aging. Locally, enhancing partnerships to increase outreach, ensure programs tailored to local features, and support citizens' networks and participation.
Communication and awareness	Awareness-raising and sensitizing campaigns. A platform to facilitate data sharing, networking, and collaboration.
Education	Enhancing education, learning, and social participation of older adults in all life contexts and phases of life; supporting lifelong learning in institutions, groups, and with professionals and policy makers. Focus on intergenerational learning to support reciprocal understanding and respect, reduce social isolation, and share knowledge across age groups. Training educators working with older adults to respond more effectively to heterogeneous and changing learning needs and dynamics. Enforcing participatory methods to nurture older adults' capacity to learn through transformative relationships and interaction, trust, cooperation, and shared responsibility. Mainstreaming a culture of healthy and active aging by disseminating knowledge, promoting a healthy lifestyle, balanced work, family, and leisure time, relationships to oneself, others, and the environment. Teach specific programs for prevention and self-directed health management.
Socio-psychological intervention	Creation of supportive spaces for older adults facing emotional challenges (e.g., grief, loneliness, fear/refusal of aging, depression), where participants can feel emotionally secure and supported in their learning processes. Creation of social opportunities, peer support, and friendship within educational programs. Enhancing the emotional well-being and self-care of older adults, as well as professionals and caregivers, as a fundamental part of building up a society. Promoting everybody's awareness of structural and discursive ageism, limited accessibility, and unequal opportunities, to enable critical reflexivity on the conditions of longevity.

life. The Italian context appears constellated by a wide range of agencies offering programs and activities to address older adults' needs and interests, but not based on systematic research and knowledge. Our findings indicate the absence of a clear framework and coordination at the local, regional, and national levels. A shared vision across disciplines and actions would help to create a culture of learning in later life, based on different perspectives and embracing an open, pluralistic, and scalable approach. Our discussion identified four key areas to improve an integrated culture of lifelong learning for active aging (Table 5).

Lifelong education and learning are the pillars for the creation of a shared culture of AA, for the present and the future. The analysis of promising practices has shown, in this study, that where it is possible to build up good structural conditions, contexts, and pedagogies beyond older adults' learning, to involve care givers, professionals, and other stakeholders, and provide meaningful experiences, active participation, and community cohesion, people are able to recognize the effectiveness and beauty of such actions for their well-being. The next step would be to establish coherent interdisciplinary ways and tools to assess these practices and scale them up.

Author Notes

1. From its inception, the Age-It Research Program involved key stakeholders who contributed to the program design. On October 25, 2023, after ten months of operations, the main stakeholders met for discussion and exchange. The meeting produced ideas and proposals for future activities and their impact on society. The stakeholder group consists of four national and regional bodies and institutes, 23 NGOs and professional associations, nine research agencies, and eight representatives from the industrial and healthcare sectors. The list is available at: https://ageit.eu/wp/2023/10/25/primo-incontro-con-gli-stakeholder-di-age-it/

Funding

This resource was co-financed by the. Next Generation EU, Mission 4 Component 2, within the NRRP (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) project "Age-It - Ageing Well in an Ageing Society" (PE0000015 - CUP H73C22000900006).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

This research is the result of teamwork. Each author contributed to its conceptualization. In particular, the state of the art was written by Laura Formenti, methodology and quantitative and qualitative-quantitative parts by Michele Bertani, the qualitative part by Donatella Bramanti, the discussion by Rabih Chattat, and the introduction and conclusion by Vanna Boffo.

Data availability

The data and supporting files are available from the corresponding author, Vanna Boffo, University of Florence (vanna.boffo@unifi.it) on request.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the director of the Age-It partnership, Professor Daniele Vignoli, for calling us to take part in the Learning, Education, and Active Aging Board and for supporting our research project. Thanks to the Age-It stakeholders for answering the questionnaire and participating in the interviews. Meeting them provided great moments of understanding and opportunities to listen to each other.

Supplement sponsorship

This article appears as part of the supplement titled "Aging Well in an Aging Society: Italy at the Forefront of Population Aging," sponsored by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Next Generation EU, Project Age-It: "Ageing Well in an Ageing Society" (Decree of the Italian Ministry of University and Research no. 1557–11 October 2022, Project Code: PE0000015, CUP B13D22001320006). The views and opinions expressed are only those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be held responsible for them.

References

Baltes, P. B., Reese, H. W., & Lipsitt, L. P. (1980). Life-span developmental psychology. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *31*, 65–110. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.ps.31.020180.000433

Barbabella, F., Cela, E., Di Matteo, C., Socci, M., Lamura, G., Checcucci, P., & Principi, A. (2020). New multilevel partnerships and policy perspectives on active ageing in Italy: A national plan of action. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *17*, 9585. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17249585

Barbabella, F., Cela, E., Socci, M., Lucantoni, D., Zannella, M., & Principi, A. (2022). Active ageing in Italy: A systematic review of national and regional policies. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*, 600. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19010600

Bazant, E., McPhillips-Tangum, C., Shrestha, S. D., G.S., P., Khera, A., Nic Lochlainn, L., Habtamu, E., Patel, V. I., Muhire, G., & Saarlas, K. N. (2022). Promising practices for the collaborative planning of integrated health campaigns from a synthesis of case studies. *BMJ Global Health*, *7*, e010321. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2022-010321

Bischoff, L., Franke, A., & Wanka, A. (2021). Resonant retiring? Experiences of resonance in the transition to retirement. *Frontiers in Sociology*, *6*, 723359. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.723359

Bjursell, C. (2019). Inclusion in education later in life. Why older adults engage in education activities?*European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, *10*, 215–230. http://doi.org/10.25656/01:18091

Boffo, V. (ed.). (2006). *La cura in pedagogia: linee di lettura*. Clueb.

Boffo, V. (2022). Per avviare il discorso. Costruire l'ageing. *Epale Journal*, *12*, 9–16. https://www.erasmusplus.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/EPALE_JOURNAL_IT_N_12_2022.pdf

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Dewey, J. (2024). *Democracy and education*. Columbia University Press. (Original edition 1916).

Erikson, E. H., Erikson, J. M., & Kivnick, H. Q. (1986). *Vital involvement in old age*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Field, J., & Leicester, M. (Eds.) (2003). *Lifelong learning: Education across the lifespan*. Psychology Press.

Findsen, B. (2018). Learning in later adulthood: a critical perspective. In M. Milana, S. Webb, J. Holford, R. Waller, & P. Jarvis (Eds.), *The Palgrave International Handbook on adult and lifelong education and learning* (pp. 839–855). Palgrave.

Findsen, B., & Formosa, M. (2012). *Lifelong learning in later life*. Springer Science & Business Media.

Formenti, L. (2018). Complexity, adult biographies, and co-operative transformation. In M. Milana, S. Webb, J. Holford, R. Waller, & P. Jarvis (Eds.), *The Palgrave International Handbook on adult and lifelong education and learning* (pp. 191–209). Palgrave Macmillan.

Formenti, L., & West, L. (2018). *Transforming perspectives in lifelong learning and adult education. A dialogue*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Formosa, M. (2012). Critical geragogy: situating theory in practice. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies*, *5*, 36–54. https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/1212/1/Critical%20geragogy%20-%20Situating%20theory%20in%20practice.pdf

Formosa, M. (2018). The promise of geragogy: Ensuring quality standards for older adult learning. *Proceedings of AIUTA international conference: Standards of education among U3as and the intergenerational formation*, 13–17. https://docslib.org/doc/11210472/standards-of-education-among-u3as-and-the-intergenerational-formation-barcelona-29th-june-2018

Formosa, M. (2019). *The University of the Third Age and active ageing. European and Asian-Pacific Perspectives*. Springer.

Ghiglione, R., Beauvois, J. L., Trognon, A., & Chabrol, C. (1980). *Manuel d'analyse de contenu*. Armand Colin.

Glendenning, F. (Ed.) (2000). *Teaching and learning in later life. Theoretical implications*. Routledge.

Hachem, H. (2020). Is there a need for a fourth statement? An examination of the critical and humanist statements of educational gerontology principles. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *39*, 465–477. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2020.1801869

Hachem, H. (2023). Depolarising and restating the principles of educational gerontology: a late modern rationale. *International Journal of Education and Ageing*, *5*, 105–118. https://oru.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1809164/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Hoge, M. A., Paris, M., Adger, H., Collins, F. L., Finn, C. V., Fricks, L., Gill, K. J., Haber, J., Hansen, M., Ida, D. J., Kaplan, L., Northey, W. F., O'Connell, M. J., Rosen, A. L., Taintor, Z., Tondora, J., & Young, A. S. (2005). Workforce competencies in behavioral health: an overview. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health*, *32*, 593–631. http://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-005-3259-x

Illeris, K. (2014). Transformative learning and identity. *Journal of Transformative Education*, *12*, 148–163. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344614548423

International Council on Active Ageing (2019). *Nine Principles of Active Ageing*. https://www.icaa.cc/activeagingandwellness/activeaging.htm

Ivankova, N. V., Creswell, J. W., & Stick, S. L. (2006). Using mixed-methods sequential explanatory design: from theory to practice. *Field Methods*, *18*, 3–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05282260

Kern, D., & Schmidt-Hertha, B. (2023). Developing competencies to cope with transitions in later life. Particularities of learning offers for older adults. *Journal of Theories and Research in Education*, *18*, 97–112. https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/15779

Knowles, M. (1990). *The adult learner: A neglected species*. Gulf Publishing.

Laslett, P. (1991). *A fresh map of life. The emergence of the third age*. Harvard University Press.

McGuire, S. L. (2017). Aging education: A worldwide imperative. *Creative Education*, *08*, 1878–1891. https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2017.812128

McMurtry, A., & Sasser, J. (2020). Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches to ageing and gerontology. In Luszczynska M. (Ed.) *Researching Ageing. Methodological challenges and their empirical background* (pp. 29–40). Routledge Advances in Research Methods.

Mezirow, J. (2018). Transformative learning theory. In Illeris K. (Ed.), *Contemporary theories of learning* (pp. 114–128). Routledge.

Morse, J. M., & Niehaus, L. (2009). *Mixed method design: principles and procedures*. Left Coast Press.

Narushima, M., Liu, J., & Diestelkamp, N. (2018). Lifelong learning in active ageing discourse: its conserving effect on wellbeing, health and vulnerability. *Ageing and Society*, *38*, 651–675. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X16001136

Peterson, D. A. (1976). Educational gerontology: the state of the art. *Educational Gerontology*, *1*, 61–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.1976.12049517

Principi, A., Di Rosa, M., Domínguez-Rodríguez, A., Varlamova, M., Barbabella, F., Lamura, G., & Socci, M. (2023). The Active Ageing Index and policy-making in Italy. *Ageing and Society*, *43*, 2554–2579. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X21001835

Quattrociocchi, L., Tibaldi, M., Marsili, M., Fenga, L., & Caputi, M. (2021). Active ageing and living condition of older persons across Italian regions. *Journal of Population Ageing*, *14*, 91–136. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12062-020-09309-z

Sala, A., Punie, Y., Garkov, V., & Cabrera Giraldez, M. (2020). *LifeComp: The European framework for personal, social and learning to learn key competence*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://dx.doi.org/10.2760/302967

Teater, B., & Chonody, J. M. (2020). How do older adults define successful aging? A scoping review. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development*, *91*, 599–625. https://doi.org/10.1177/0091415019871207

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2019). *2018 Active Ageing Index: Analytical Report*. https://unece.org/DAM/pau/age/Active_Ageing_Index/ECE-WG-33.pdf

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2020). *Stocktaking on Mainstreaming Ageing in the UNECE Region. Country Note–Italy*. https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Italy_CN_EN.pdf

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2021). *Guidelines for Mainstreaming Ageing*. https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/ECE-WG.1-37_Guidelines_for-Mainstreaming_Ageing_1.pdf

Vignoli, D., Albertini, M., Chiatti, C., Aimaretti, G., Boccuzzo, G., Boffo, V., Brugiavini, A., Cavallo, F., Cenci, S., Cherubini, A., Cincotti, F., d'Adda di Fagagna, F., Ferrarese, C., Galasso, V., Galeotti, E., Graziani, A., Iaccarino, G., Lattanzio, F., Lucifora, C.Petrucci, A. (2025). Aging well in an aging society: Italy at the forefront of global aging and the Age-It research program. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *80(Supplement_2)*, gbaf219. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaf219

Wildemeersch, D., & Stroobants, V. (2018). Transitional learning and reflexive facilitation: the case of learning for work. In Illeris K. (Ed.), *Contemporary theories of learning* (pp. 229–242). Routledge.

Withnall, A. (2006). Exploring influences on later life learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *25*, 29–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370500309477

Withnall, A. (2009). *Improving learning in later life*. Routledge.

World Health Organization (2002). *Active Ageing. A policy Framework*. http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/67215/WHO_NMH_NPH_02.8.pdf

Zhu, X., & Li, C. (2021). A phenomenological exploration of the square dance among the Chinese elderly in urbanised communities. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, *28*, 100494. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2021.100494

The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences 2025 80 S212–S221
https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaf175
Supplement: Aging Well in an Aging Society: Italy at the Forefront of Population Aging: Research Article