

DISTANCE LEARNING FOR THE ELDERLY – OUR EXPERIENCE

The importance of digital competencies and skills is more important than ever. An adult learning provider can do all the thinkable and unthinkable preparations for a course, but surprises still emerge. The adult education providers are flexible, but the question is how flexible are learners. The situation with COVID-19 has been presenting adult education providers with a challenge, which is the inclusion of some adult learners' groups (low-qualified, especially those with low (digital) skills, older adults, migrants and asylum seekers, Roma, people with disabilities etc.).

We are dealing with these vulnerable groups in several educational programmes in our organization. Although online courses and lectures are very popular nowadays, vast groups of people consciously stay away from such methods and our organization has a long-term tradition of providing traditional learning. Especially among seniors and low qualified learning groups. Among the five organizations in our region with the same organizational model, neither had on-line courses and lectures for older learners. For this reason, our challenge was even bigger.

During this time, our first goal was to keep in touch with the learners. Sometimes to stay in touch or communicate via phone or Facebook helped as well and carry out our activities via different on-line tools and environments.

However, the motivation of learners to take up digital learning was sometimes quite a challenge and needed special attention. Our mission started with the assumption that modern technologies are not only tools for transferring information, but also or mainly a communication medium. The problem was that most of our learners fall into the so-called vulnerable groups: the elderly, immigrants, social and economically weak individuals, and those with a lower level of education. Although older learners use computer and smartphones, a transition to e-learning was rather difficult for some people.

Organizing adult learning for the elderly during the lock-down

Of course, some activities required physical presence and we postponed them in an autumn month. Digital learning had taken over whenever and wherever it was possible. It turned out that we need several different approaches and methods. The most important thing is to treat them individually and to call them on the telephone, enquire about their options and mainly motivate them.

We started gradually. After some testing, we found out that Zoom and Skype were too demanding for the older population.

So, we created a YouTube channel with video/audio presentations. Every week our learners got a link to new educational content. The topics were different: personal growth, health, cultural heritage We were also very lucky, that there was a possibility to shoot seven short videos with herbalist's advice. These videos were also posted on our Facebook page. PowerPoint presentations with audio presentations and videos have been very successful. The participants liked them because it was possible to view the same clip several times.

In a while, our learners become quite confident with distance learning and they started to participate in short webinars held via Jitsi meet. We sent all participants pictures and text instructions for using the platform. Before carrying out e-activities, we organised the short meetings the only purpose of which was to welcome the learners to the e-classroom. We would phone a learner who was not doing well and help them find the right "buttons" for audio, video, etc.

Future challenges

- Some teachers, who are excellent in traditional learning, did not have any experiences with distance learning and it was a big challenge for them to adjust the educational program for distance learning.
- Some older teachers weren't confident enough for distance learning.

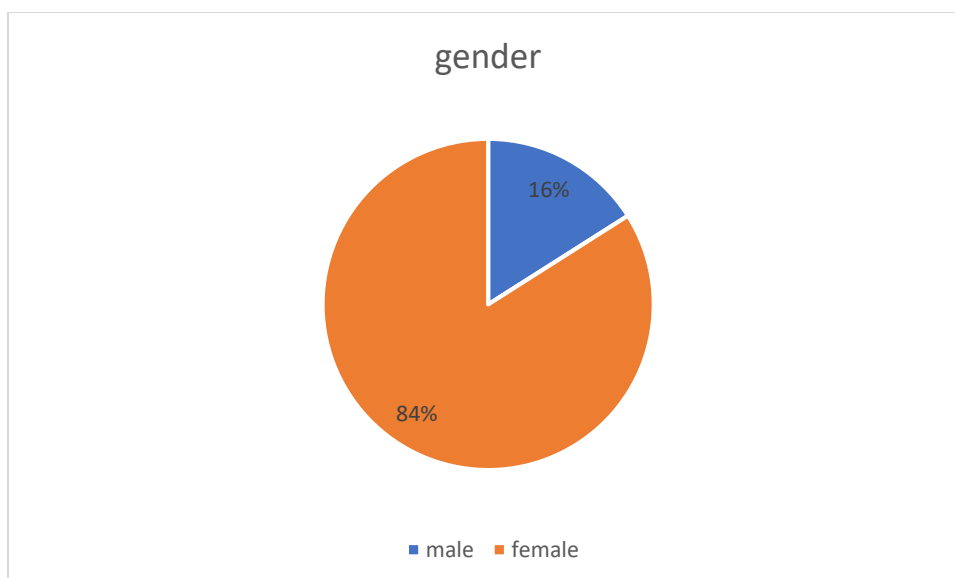
- The motivation of older learners who are participating in our programs for years, some even decades. (Those learners were less integrated into our activities.)
- Organizing workshops in classrooms to educate elders for dealing with different digital learning options.
- Organizing workshops for teachers.
- Organizing extensive educational programs.

Survey analysis

The survey included 324 adults aged 60 and over, with fieldwork conducted in April to May 2020.

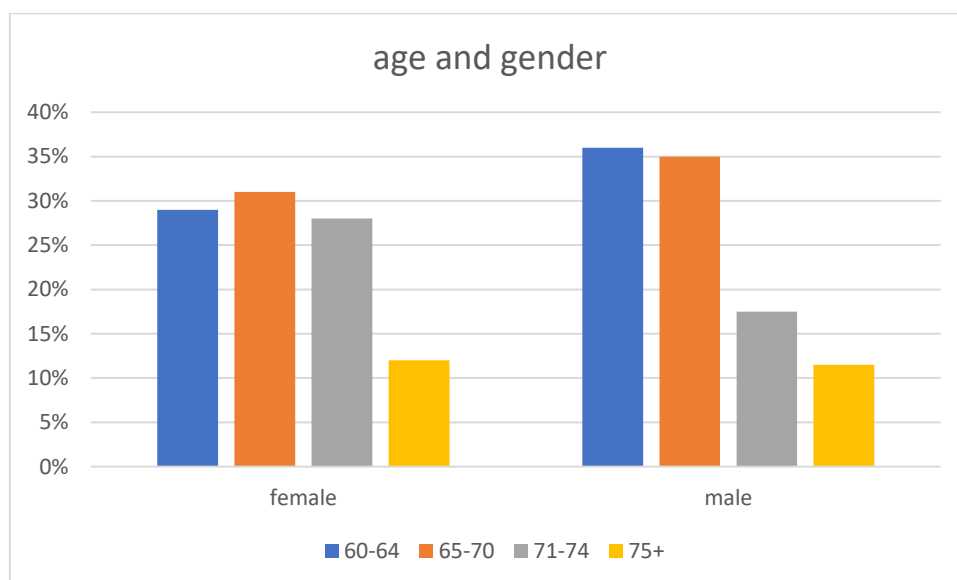
1. Gender

(272 females and 52 males responded to our survey. Majority of our learners are females.)



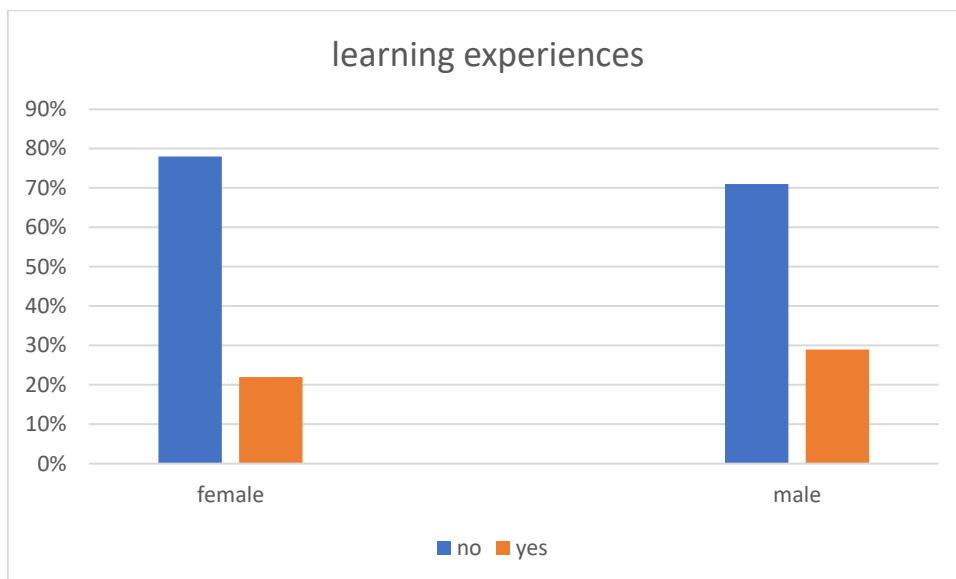
2. Age and gender

	female	%	male	%
60-64	79	29%	19	36%
65-70	82	31%	18	35,00%
71-74	77	28%	9	17,50%
75+	34	12%	6	11,50%
	272	100%	52	100%

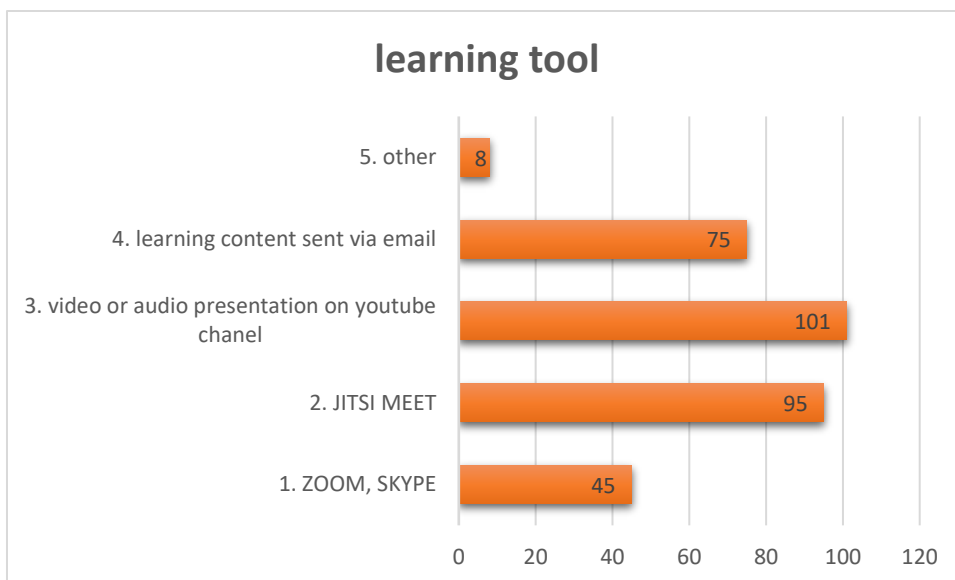


3. Did you have any experiences with online learning before Covid-19 situation?

	female	%	male	%
no	212	78%	37	71%
yes	60	22%	15	29%
	272	100%	52	100%

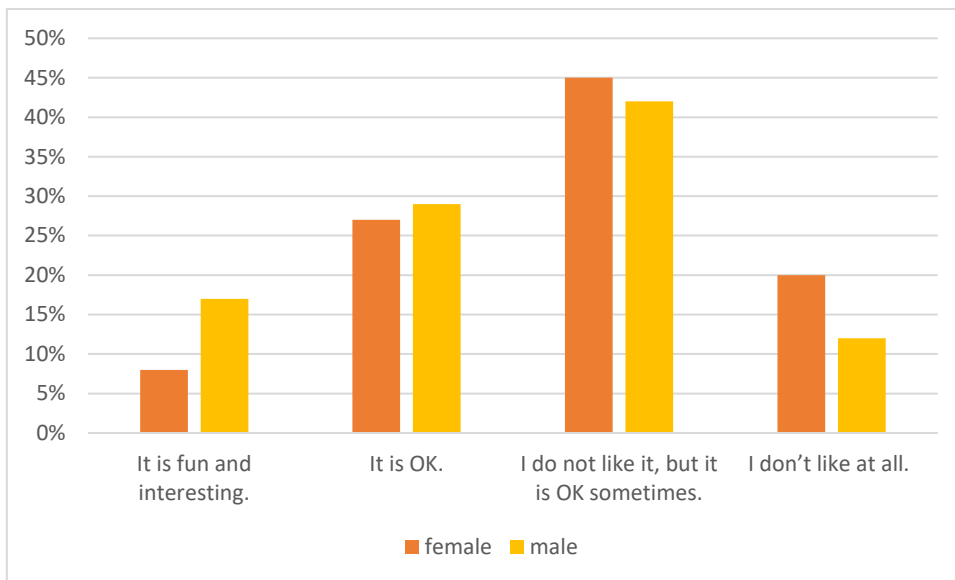


4. Which digital learning option did you prefer?

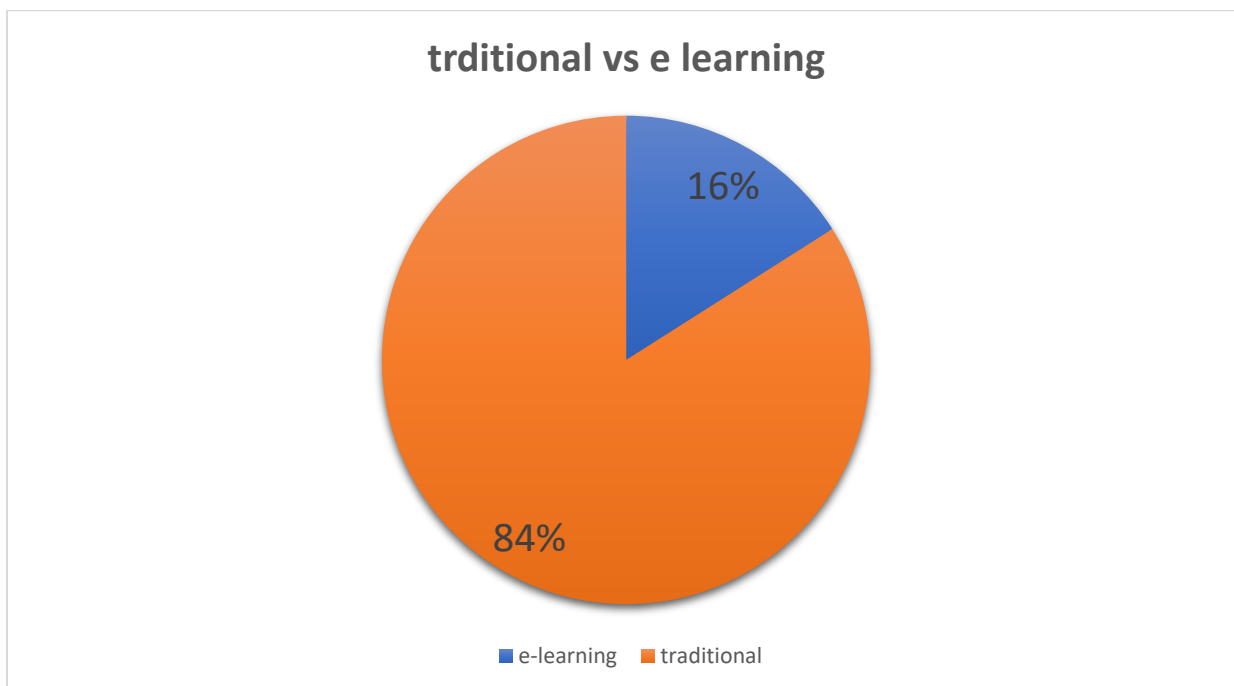


5. How do you fill during e learning?

	female	%	male	%
It is fun and interesting.	22	8%	9	17%
It is OK.	75	27%	15	29%
I do not like it, but it is OK sometimes.	121	45%	22	42%
I don't like at all.	54	20%	6	12%
	272	100%	52	100%



6. What sort of learning do you prefer?



7. Would you like to add something?

- Distance learning is great, but I miss my school friends.
- Thank you for your effort and kindness.
- I have experience with Google meet; it was great, maybe you should check.
- Interesting topics.
- Great teachers.
- I am not sure, if this work for me.
- I is good for saving time, but I need more interaction with the teacher.
- My internet connection is not good, so I couldn't participate.

Conclusion

One of the strongest reasons why older people are integrating into university for the third age is socializing with friends and teachers. Although the survey shows, that elderly still prefer traditional learning we will continue with some educational programs online or develop new programs using blended learning.