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**"PEERING OVER «A» HEDGE"**

1. Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is a privilege for me to be on this podium and take up a few minutes of your time.

Instead of delivering a speech I would like to show you some slides and share some thoughts and peering over a hedge. I wonder, what is this hedge we should be peering over?

Let me begin by sharing a picture with you.

2. Do you notice anything striking?

When people from the so-called Western Europe visit Latvia – or any post-Soviet European state – they tend to make a rather unexpected observation. In the post-Soviet Europe, cafés and restaurants are full of – almost exclusively – young people, while the seniors are conspicuously absent. Clearly, it is the young people who have money and habit of enjoying going out and socializing.

It stands in a sharp contrast to the habits in the so-called "old" Europe, where it is usually the seniors who often crowd cafés and restaurants. One could get an impression that in the Western Europe the retired people have all the time and money in the world. I won-

der if this could be a difference in paradigms of growing old.

3. This observation reflects what could be seen as a distinction between concepts of passive and active retirement. Societies with active retirement are more suited to prolonging the active lifespan of the people. At the moment it is the passive retirement concept that dominates in Latvia. Clearly, such perceptions translate among other things into economic potential of the society. But passive retirement is dominating in Latvia not because we choose it consciously – no, its more because of the historical mindset and socioeconomic consequences of a transition economy. Swedish or German pensioners' lifestyle is something Latvians dream about, I'm sure. Anything wrong with passive retirement concept?
4. The problem in the picture is clear – Latvia is getting older. Much older, as a society. This is not a unique phenomena of course. But combining with the mindset of passive retirement changes perspective. For economy and education system as well.
5. So, it turns out – it is really an AGE HEDGE that we should be peering over.  
And that's exactly what I am going to talk about – how Latvia peered over the hedge and look for new ways for utilising potential based on what we have already.
6. Not only European population, our economies are also greying. And maybe it is a good thing too, as long as we learn to take advantage of it.  
Peering over the AGE hedge is not only about increasing retirement age. We also have to become more competitive and productive. How? One of the obvious answers is – learning. Life long learning. Like we mean it. We are unlikely to produce numbers of engineering

graduates comparable to China anytime soon. But we might become best at lifelong learning.

7. With our demographic situation we can't afford to focus on teaching the youth alone, it will not work out. We have re-learn.  
We have to find innovative ideas how to continue learning and prolong our active life. The challenge is – how do we design a system accessible across the board where people live and work?
8. We decided to use the most accessible and extensive network of public institutions – public libraries. They are everywhere. And we decided to turn them into a universally accessible lifelong learning centres.
9. We did not simply install the computers and connect the internet, even in the most remote locations. We made sure we trained librarians to become leaders in their local communities, as well as trusted guides in the knowledge world.  
We also provided ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS FOR ALL AGE GROUPS - job search, interest groups, community organizing, career services, professional development.  
Libraries are at once knowledge and community centres, access points and one stop shop for e-government services.
10. Peering over the hedge worked out for us – surveys show that people view libraries as cultural and information centers not just book stores. Libraries help people to stay economically and socially active as well as access vital resources and services.
11. There is a story behind every computer and every picture. An old lady who studied online for a drivers licence test. An unemployed who found a job at a libra-

ry. A 50 year old student who attended online training course. There are countless active, productive lives that matter.

12. Our lesson is the one of using institutions you have and providing vital services to broadest possible audience to increase competitiveness and well-being.

Public libraries have turned out to be part of a solution for our ageing puzzle. But as we peer over the hedge, there are many other challenges.

13. To conclude, let me pose a few questions as we think about education and economy in Europe.

Given the importance of increasing our competitiveness should we not rethink our perceptions and approaches to education economics, such as which investment provides best ROI?

Are our institutions ready for providing life-long learning in the context of workforce mobility?

Perhaps, we should think about midlife retraining as a basic public good just as educating our youth?

I look forward to our discussion.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much!