

Senior Universities in Portugal Characterization, Motivation and health impact

Luis Jacob
Assistant Teacher and RUTIS President
Escola Superior de Educação de Santarém
Instituto Politécnico de Santarém | Portugal
Complexo Andaluz - 131, 2001-902
Santarém
luis@rutis.pt

María-José Rodríguez-Conde
Vice-rector of Teaching
and Educational Innovation
Universidade de Salamanca | Espanha
Edifício de Rectorado.
Patio de Escuelas, 1
37008 Salamanca
mjrconde@usal.es

Abstract:

Given the growth of the number of senior universities (US or U3A) in Portugal we think it is important to know who frequents these institutions, what are their motivations and the impact it has on their health.

Portugal has now, June 2020, 368 US (70% of them were created by associations) with 62.000 students and 7.500 volunteers professors. Of the 368, 296 were registered in RUTIS's national network.

The authors have created a survey that was administered in 1.016 senior students in Portugal. With this study, it was possible to trace the profile of the students who attend Senior Universities.

We now know that there are essentially women, aged between 60-75 years and of all social and educational levels. As for the motives, essentially social interaction, getting active and learning, are the top reasons people join. The majority of students has noticed a development in mental and physical health, the increase of their social contacts, improvement of their ICT skills and the reduction of depression cases.

Keywords: Senior University, non-formal education, lifelong learning, senior students

Résumé:

Vu la croissance du nombre d'université du troisième âge au Portugal, nous considérons qu'il est important connaître le public qui fréquente ces établissements, leurs motivations, l'impact sur la santé et s'il existe des différences significatives entre les deux pays. Les auteurs ont élaboré une enquête qui a été appliquée en 1016 étudiants seniors au Portugal.

Selon cette étude, ça a été possible établir le profil des étudiants qui fréquentent les université du troisième âge (UTA ou U3A) au Portugal.

En juin 2020, Portugal avait 368 UTA (70% créés par des associations) avec 62 000 élèves et 7 500 enseignants volontaires, dont 296 sont inscrits sur le Réseau national (RUTIS).

Après cette étude, nous savons maintenant que ce sont principalement des femmes âgées de 60 à 75 ans et de tous niveaux sociaux et éducatifs.

En ce qui concerne les motifs, c'est avant tout la convivialité, être actif et apprendre.

La plupart des interrogés ont reconnu, des gains de santé physique et mentale, augmenté le réseau de contacts sociaux, augmenté ses connaissances en informatique et ont de faibles niveaux de dépression.

Mots-clés: université supérieure, éducation non formelle, apprentissage tout au long de la vie, étudiants seniors

1 - Introduction

With the current and progressive ageing of the population in the West, the urgency of creating a specific theoretical and educational model for older adults, in which the professional purpose is not the most important. The ideas of pedagogical gerontology or of educational gerontology arise, as the authors. According to Osorio, "the purpose (of educational Gerontology) is to prevent the premature decline, facilitate the development of significant roles for senior people, psychological development, so as to prolong the health and productive years and increase the quality of life of senior people "(2005, p. 280).

The education for the elderly has been the subject of several investigations and are currently accepted two complementary theories: one that conceives education as a strategy of "social therapy", promoting and encouraging the social integration (and in this case the education is an instrument for the promotion and social integration), the second perspective understands that a better aging for those that keep the mind active through educational activities. In this vision, education is simultaneously a kind of mental gymnastics, which prevents the deterioration of cognitive abilities and an instrument for the acquisition of new knowledge.

In this situation emerge the Senior Universities (US), which is a larger example of citizenship, education, social inclusion, volunteering, knowledge, learning and community development. It existed in June 2020 in Portugal, 338 Senior Universities

recorded in Portugal and close to 62,000 students and 7,500 volunteer teachers. (Jacob, 2020), of this US, 70% are created by associations and the other 30% by counties.

The Senior Universities emerged in 1972 in France as a specific educational movement for the seniors at the University of Toulouse, with Dr. Pierre Vellas. The model quickly grew and reached other countries that adapted to their reality. Currently there are two great models of organization of the US: the French model and the English model. The French model associates the US to formal universities, while the British model was developed based on volunteering, non-profit associations or self-organizing groups. In addition to these two great models there are several mixed models and with small variants. Thus, the University of the third age or Senior University, are the "educational answers that seek to create and streamline regularly activities in the social, cultural areas of knowledge and conviviality, from 50 years of age, continued by public or private entities, whether for profit or not, "according to the Council of Ministers Resolution nº 76/2016).

In April 2016 the Portuguese Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security (MSTSS) wrote the following text illuminating the importance of US: "The results of the action of the universities and Senior Academies are unquestionable as they provide welfare, both in strengthening the perspectives of social integration and participation in improving the conditions and quality of life of the people who attend them. The added values are not only in the maintenance of intellectual and physical nature activities and acquisition of knowledge, but also the primary nature of socialization and maintaining social contacts. If, on the one hand, the stimulus to learning capacity and participation can contribute to society to distance themselves from some of the stereotypes and negative images attributed to aging and old age, on the other hand, and from the individual point of view, help perspective projects and future goals, promoting, thus, the increase in life expectancy with quality and dignity ".

"Senior Universities regularly provide classes, lectures, events and cultural guides, thematic workshops, meetings, outreach and information sessions, surveys, voluntary and solidarity actions, performances, floral games, contests, seminars, intergenerational days and visits to museums, theatres and monuments to all seniors, regardless of their academic, economic or social level." Jacob (2017).

Several scientific and academic studies, demonstrate and confirm that attending a senior University enhances the quality of life of its regulars, improves one's general health, reduces feelings of depression and isolation, diminishes the consumption of medicines and increases social integration (see Jacob, 2009; Jesus, 2010; Pocinho, 2015,

Rebelo, 2016).

2- Materials and Methods

To meet the students of the senior universities and their motivations, the authors have created a survey with close-ended questions that they delivered personally to the students to fill out. The questionnaire was applied to 1.016 people from all over the country, in the months of February and March 2018. In the study on depression the Geriatric Depression Scale of Yesavage was applied, short version of 15 questions.

3 – Results of the student’s characterisation:

In the following table we present a summary of the characterisation of Portuguese and students.

Table 1– characterization of senior students in Portugal

Data	Portugal
Participants	1.016
Gender	Female – 71.9% Male – 28.1%
Age:	
under 64 years	28.1%
between 65 a 75 years	57.1%
over 75 years	14.8%
How many days they stay at the US	1 day – 11.8% 2 days – 35.5% 3 days – 22.7% 4 days – 23.6% 5 days – 6.4%
How many subjects they enrol in	1 – 5.9% 2 – 23.8% 3 – 23.8%

4 – 17.8%

5 – 15.8%

Over 6 – 12.9%

Regarding the educational level the groups are very heterogeneous. The highlight goes to the students with the 5th and 7th grade and between the 10th and 12th grade in Portugal. The women represent 71,9% of the group, 90% are retired and the most common age between 65 and 75 years old. The students usually spent 2 to 3 days in the US and take part in 2 to 4 subjects.

4 – Results of motivations

Another objective of the study was to know what motivated the students to attend these institutions and what they hoped to achieve by attending them. The results obtained are consistent with the existing literature. According to Florindo (2008, p. 67), “The main justification for going back to school is the need or desire to learn and improve your knowledge (40%), followed by the desire to keep active (13%).”

In our survey in Portugal the main motivations were, in order: keep active (76%); Learn and knowledge acquisition in general (52.6%) and meet new people/socialization (51%).

5 – Results of health impact

As for the impact of the US frequency on their lives, respondents indicated almost no "meaningless" points, with the greatest gains being in having an active life, improving their mental health, increasing their knowledge, better physical health and more self-esteem. We can see that the impact of the frequency of US on the health of the elderly is quite significant, as we can see in the table 2.

Table 2 – Health impact, after bee in a US

Question	Answer
In relation to your general health condition, you think that:	
Improved:	51.7%

Worsened:	1%
It was the same:	47.3%

Applying the Yesavage Geriatric Depression Scale in its short version of 15 questions it was possible to verify that the number of respondents with symptoms of mild depression or recorded depression are much lower than in the general elderly population.

	Seniores Students	Seniores in Portugal
without depression	92%	57%
Mild depression	7.4%	43%
Severe depression	0.6%	

* Depression in elderly: prevalence and associated factors

<http://www.rpmgf.pt/ojs/index.php/rpmgf/article/view/10764/10500>, 2010

Discussion and Conclusion

This study shows that the audience is mainly female but very heterogeneous in educational level, income and age and the attendance has a real positive impact in the lives of its regular students. The motivations that lead the seniors to these institutions is the social gathering, keep active and learn more.

The impact of these organizations on health is very significant, with the vast majority of respondents feeling better, mentally and physically. After being in the US, the consumption of anxiety medications has dropped significantly and the levels of depression are very low.

Bibliography

- Resolução do Concelho de Ministros (RCM) nº 76/16 de 2016
- Florindo, Maria, (2008), *Transição para a reforma no concelho de Évora: Assimetrias sócio-educativas entre urbanidade e ruralidade*, dissertação de Mestrado em Educação na FCSH da Universidade Nova de Lisboa.
- Jesus, Alcidio (2010), *A importância da universidade sénior na qualidade de vida e solidão dos seniores em Gondomar*, dissertação de Mestrado em Gerontologia Social do Instituto Superior de Serviço Social do Porto.
- Jacob, Luis (2009), *Universidades Seniores: Criar novos projectos de Vida*, Edição RUTIS
- Jacob, Luis et all (2017), *Perfil dos Professores das Universidades da Terceira Idade*, Estudo realizado pela RUTIS
- Jacob, Luis (2020), *Universidades Seniores Portuguesas. Caracterização e desenvolvimento*. Tese de Doutoramento da Universidade de Salamanca, Espanha.
- Osório, Agustin (2005). *Educação Permanente e educação de adultos*. Horizontes pedagógicos. Edições Piaget.
- Pocinho, Ricardo (2015), *Seniores em contexto de aprendizagem: caracterização e efeitos psicológicos nos alunos das Universidades Seniores em Portugal*, Euedito
- Protocol between RUTIS and the MSTSS of April 2016
- Rebelo, Bruno (2016), *Universidades Seniores, uma visão sobre o envelhecimento activo*, Livpsic