

# Senior universities in Portugal: exploratory study for the approach of positive organisations

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## Abstract

The Association Network of Seniors Universities in Portugal (RUTIS) is a non-formal lifelong education project represented in the Economic and Social Council (CES) and involves more than 65,000 seniors, 368 organisations and 7,500 volunteer teachers. It is presumably the country in the world with proportionally the largest number of senior learners (Jacob, 2020). In this exploratory quantitative research through a questionnaire survey addressed to a sample of 1,016 individuals, the main goal is to get to know the Senior Universities as a positive organisation. The secondary goals were considered: i) to characterize the students in the sociodemographic component ii) to assess the reasons for attending university, iii) to know the importance assigned to university and iv) to assess the benefits perceived by students in this context. The results show that: i) the majority of students are female (71.85%), aged between 65-74 years (57.1%), married (65.26%), with a low level of education (47.74%) and the most representative income level is 41.54% (n=422), in the range of 401-1000€. There is a moderate positive correlation ( $\rho=0.62$ ) and statistically significant ( $p\text{-value}=0$ ) between the monthly income and the level of education of older students. ii) The possibility of remaining active, acquiring new knowledge, socializing and keeping busy are the main reasons given for enrolling/attending the US. iii) As for the importance assigned, the data point to: staying active, socializing and learning. iv) The perceived benefits are to continue having an active life, having more knowledge and improving mental health. The study data are relevant from the perspective of Martin Seligman's positive organizations (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Galinha, 2020).

**Keywords:** Leadership, Positive organisations, Universities, Seniors.

## 1 Introduction

RUTIS is the leading organisation of senior universities (SU) in Portugal. The SU are attended essentially by individuals over 50 years old. They attend on average four subjects per week, going 3 days a week in a wide technical and cultural offer. The teachers are of all ages, mostly with higher education degrees, teaching 2 hours of classes per week, equally represented by retired and active people, satisfied volunteers with a taste for teaching and helping others. The positive influence of these organisations in the lives of seniors is evident. The data shows an improvement in the perception of the physical and mental health condition of the students; an increase in the number of social contacts and consequently a reduction in the feeling of loneliness; a possible reduction in the antidepressant medication taken; levels of depression are substantially lower than in the general population; the level of knowledge has increased, essentially in the digital area,

self-esteem has risen and the students feel more active and better integrated in the community. In summary, Portuguese SU are present in practically all the national territory, are born from civil society, are an example of volunteering and contribute to improving the quality of life of seniors. The study of changes in human development in the over 50s and organizations has occupied the scientific community in a very peculiar way, being an object of study of present and future (Galinha, 2019b, Pordata, 2021).

## **2 Senior universities as positive organisations**

RUTIS aims to regularly create and streamline activities in the social, cultural, knowledge and social areas in accordance with the 2016 Council of Ministers resolution that makes the legal framework. RUTIS have as their model the international experience, where in 1973 in Toulouse the first university of the third age by Vellas in order to enhance the image of the elderly before the society, promoting their active development with more autonomy in cultural and educational activities, within the scope of a policy that promotes the self-esteem, training and socialization of older people. The first SU in Portugal were created in the early 1980s, but their great growth took place in the first decade of the 2000s. Portugal has the largest worldwide SU network, with its institutions covering almost the entire national territory. SU are present in practically the entire Portuguese territory and were born from civil society. There are two major models of SU organization worldwide. A model associates with formal universities, while other model developed based on non-profit associations or self-organized groups. The Portuguese SU are based on formal self-organized or public non-profit association organizations. SU are an excellent example of volunteering to improving the quality of life of senior citizens. Educational activities will be on a non-formal basis, without certification purposes and in the context of lifelong training.

Managing an organisation is managing a social system, based on a thorough understanding of the mechanisms of behavioural motivation and the functioning of complex social systems (Godin, 2008; Neves, Caetano, & Ferreira, 2011; Vala & Monteiro, 2013; Álvaro & Garrido, 2016; Yzerbyt & Leyens, 2018). The manager is a sense facilitator, able to engage individuals in the pursuit of organisational goals (Mintzberg, 2010; Cunha, Rego, Cunha & Cardoso, 2016; Galinha, 2020). As Costa (2003) points out, on the uniqueness of their mission, which is essentially pedagogical and educational, educational institutions thus reach a dimension where important decisions are taken, in educational, curricular and pedagogical terms. According to Matos (1997, p. 1), "it is never too much to state that only development can be considered as the purpose of education. This idea of development "contains the notion of a permanent construction either of what the person gets to know, or of what he gets to know how to do, or even of what the person is becoming, a concept valid for all who inhabit the school ethos, members of an educational community". Bertrand and Guillemet (1994) state that it is possible to find five common points in organisations: the behaviour of an organisation is guided by a culture, mission, aims, intentions and objectives; it makes use of knowledge and know-how to fulfil the tasks envisaged and achieve the objectives set; it presupposes a structuring and integration of activities: formal division of labour, allocation of

responsibilities, coordination, integration, centralisation or decentralisation; it is based on the participation of people and their characteristics: intelligence, sensitivity, motivation, the personality; and, the organisation is a totality that organises and controls the set of activities.

According to Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson (2005), Positive Psychology is the study of positive experiences, positive personalities and organisations that allow individuals, institutions and communities to flourish. The social well-being is composed of relationship opportunities, sources of social support and sharing of social values (Santos, 2020). Lopes, Galinha and Loureiro (2010) and Galinha (2020) point out the importance of Martin Seligman's perspective within organisations in general, and educational institutions in particular, towards the construction of a positive holistic profile of capabilities and possibilities. For Galinha (2019a) and Marujo and Neto (2019, p. 656), it will be relevant to consider "virtuosity as a relational, communal, ethical process, and therefore contributing to the common good and to public happiness". In this model, the classification system for positive aspects emphasises strengths and character, called "Values in Action (VIA) - Classification of Strengths and Virtues". In this manual the strengths were divided into emotional, cognitive, relational and civic characteristics and into six groups of virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperament and transcendence. The Lifelong Learning Institute conducted a study into the motivations for lifelong learning. In a survey of 860 adults aged 55 to 96 who participated in a range of lifelong learning activities, eight out of ten respondents cited the pleasure gained from learning (Lamdin & Fugate, 1997). In the Survey on Lifelong Learning of over 1000 people aged 50 and over, 90% of respondents identified the desire to keep up with what is happening in the world, their own spiritual or personal growth and the satisfaction of learning something new as reasons for going to school. In another study, from the University of Southern Maine (The LLI Review, 2010), the average age was 73.4 years and respondents consistently cited the desire for community living as one of the main motivations for participating in lifelong learning projects. In Portugal, in surveys conducted among students in US (non-formal education), the results were identical, the main justification for going back to school consists of the need or desire to learn and improve their knowledge (40%), followed by the desire to maintain activity (13%). After retirement, 43% of seniors responded that they would like to engage in a hobby and 75% agreed with the existence of training provision for retired people (Jacob, 2015).

### **3 Methodology**

This is a quantitative exploratory study carried out in Portugal during 2019-2020 and addressed to 1016 individuals attending Portuguese Senior Universities in order to get to know these positive organisations (Jacob, 2020; Marujo & Neto, 2019). The secondary goals were considered: i) characterise the students of senior universities ii) evaluate the reasons for attending, iii) know the importance given to the iii) knowing the importance attributed to it and iv) listing the benefits perceived by students in their attendance. The survey applied for data collection SRIB-Sociodemographic, Reasons, Importance and

Bennefits (Jacob, 2020) contemplated: i) sociodemographic questions (gender, age, marital status, years of attendance/university, number of subjects attended/year, attendance/number of days per week, schooling, monthly income); ii) importance of personal reasons for attending university - 4- point Likert-type scale (1- not significant, 4- very significant); iii) importance given to the Senior University - 4 point Likert scale (1- not very important, 4- very important); iv) benefits perceived by the seniors - 5 point Likert scale (1- worsened considerably, 5- improved considerably). The random sample of 1016 individuals was selected from a universe of 45,000 students enrolled in the US, corresponding to approximately 2.26% of the population. The descriptive study is presented using frequency tables. The sample mean (with the respective standard deviation - SD) and the extreme values (maximum/minimum) observed will be used as location measures. The present study has a substantially descriptive character. However, the following research hypotheses were considered at the inferential level: Ho-null hypothesis: There is no association/relationship between students' monthly income and their level of education; Ha-alternative hypothesis: There is an association between students' monthly income and their level of education. Spearman's correlation coefficient was used to measure the association/relationship between the variables. A significance level  $\alpha=5\%$  was set.

#### **4 Results**

The demographic characterisation of the sample of students attending Portuguese SU is depicted in Tab. 1.

Tab. 1 - Demographic characterization of the students. Source: own research

	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	730	71,85%
Male	286	28,15%
<b>Age group</b>		
≤ 64 years old	285	28,05%
65 - 74 years old	581	57,19%
≥75 years	150	14,76%
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married / Living with a partner	649	65,26%
Single	54	5,31%
Widow(er)	214	21,06%
Divorced	85	8,37%

Frequency of each class (n); percentage of frequency (%)

Tab. 1 shows that most students are female (71.85%), between 65 and 74 years old (57.1%) and married/cohabiting (65.26%). The average age of the students is 68.71 years (SD=6.7), the youngest and the oldest being 51.1 and 91 years, respectively. The average number of subjects attended in the US is 3.8 subjects (SD=1.6), with students having attended only a single subject as well as students having attended six subjects throughout each academic year. Regarding the number of days spent in the US per week the average was 3 days (SD=1.2), with attendance varying between one and six days. Afterwards, it was checked how long the students have been attending the US, with the following frequency: less than a year (13.48%, n=137); between 1 and 5 years (55.61%, n=565); more than 5 years (30.91%, n=314). Tab. 2 tries to portray the socio-economic condition of the students enrolled in the Portuguese US. It shows that almost all the students are retired (88%, n=894), as far as schooling is concerned, a minority has primary education

(16.44%, n=167) and the remaining classes are relatively homogeneous, with a higher prevalence of students with basic education (31.30%, n=318). Therefore, we can verify that almost half of the registered students (47.74%) have a low level of education. Regarding the level of income, the most representative class, 41.54% (n=422), is in the range of 401 - 1000€.

Subsequently, a moderate positive correlation (Spearman's correlation coefficient  $\rho=0.622$ ), and statistically significant (p-value=0) was found between monthly income and schooling of senior students i.e. the null hypothesis is rejected for a significance level  $\alpha=5\%$ . This is valid for these generations, where very few continued studying, so that those who managed to finish higher education usually had access to better remunerations. The possibility to remain active, to learn and acquire new knowledge and to stay busy are the most important reasons for the respondents to have started attending SU, reasons that are also present in the consulted bibliography.

Tab. 2 - Socio-economic characterization of US students. Source: own research

	n	%
<b>Professional status</b>		
Retired	894	88,00%
Working	41	4,03%
Housewife	62	6,10%
Other	19	1,87%
<b>Academic Qualifications</b>		
Up to primary education	167	16,44%
Primary education	318	31,30%
Secondary education	247	24,31%
Higher education	284	27,95%
<b>Monthly personal income</b>		
< 400 €	159	15,65%
401 - 1000 €	422	41,54%
1001-1500€	248	24,41%
>1500€	187	18,41%

Frequency of each class (n); percentage of frequency (%)

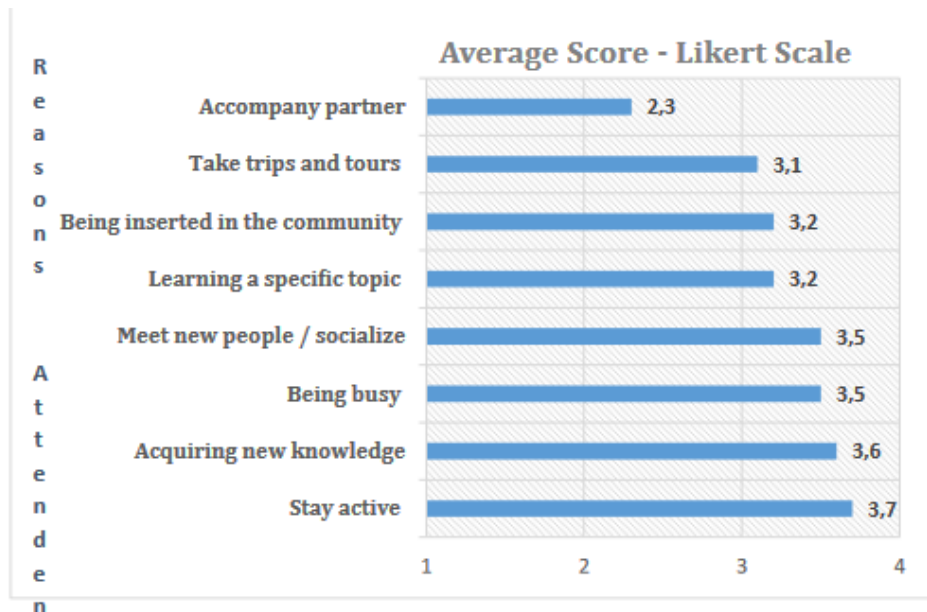


Fig. 1 - Reasons for SU attendance: average score in a four-point Likert scale (1- not significant, 4- very significant). Source: own research

Fig. 1 shows the mean score on the Likert-type scale taking into account the main reasons for attending the PED. It can be seen that the mean scores obtained in each of the items that make up the scale are higher than the centre of the scale (2). The items with the highest and lowest mean scores respectively were "Acquiring new knowledge" and "Accompany partner". When called upon to assign a level of importance to some aspects of the university/senior academy, the importance of remaining active and learning was once again reinforced. In addition to these aspects, socialising also appeared to be an important characteristic, which demonstrates that, more than an educational response, US is a social response. The respective information can be seen in Fig. 2. The average scores obtained are higher than the centre of the scale (2).

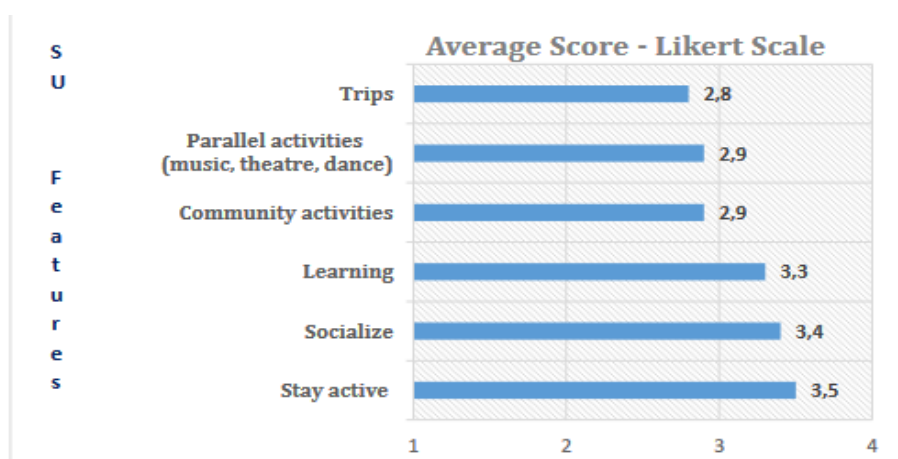


Fig. 2 - Importance given to the features of the SU – average score in a four-point Likert scale (1- not very important, 4- very important). Source: own research

Continuing to lead an active life, having more knowledge and improving mental health are the most identified gains from attending SU (Fig. 3), which is in line with the literature consulted. In addition, we found that senior students are very homogeneous in the valuation of the benefits perceived by attending SU with very identical sample mean values (between 4.2 and 4.5).

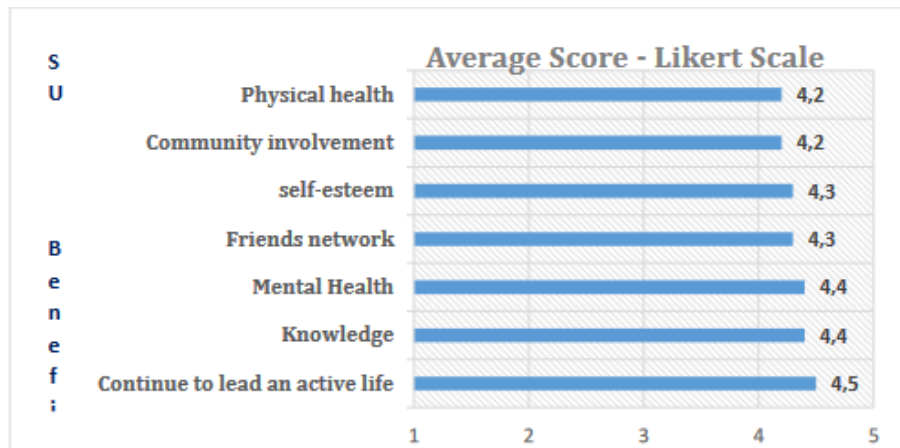


Fig. 3- Perceived benefits of attending SU – average score in a five-point Likert scale (1- got a lot worse, 5- got a lot better). Source: own research

## 5 Discussion

The positive correlation ( $\rho=0.62$ ) found between income and students' level of education is particularly valid for these generations, where very few of them continued studying, so that those who managed to complete higher education usually had access to better salaries. The modal age range of students at senior universities is between 60-75 years, meaning that they started their primary education in the 1950s and 1960s. This means that (in the period 1960-1973), out of approximately 200,000 new primary school pupils, only 5,000 complete a degree course (less than 3%) (Loura, 2020, p.22). Still maintained is the positive relationship between schooling and earnings "This condition is aligned with the fact that, on average, the risk of poverty for the adult population decreases with increasing educational attainment. The risk of poverty for someone who had education at secondary school level or above is about half the risk faced by someone who has less than secondary education" (INE, 2014). Seniors attending university reveal the importance attributed to staying active, socialising and learning themes. There is also consistency with regard to the perceived benefits since there is data on seniors continuing to lead an active life, have more knowledge and improve their mental health. Cross-sectional consistency is verified (Jacob, 2015, 2020; Lamdin & Fugate, 1997). These data are important in light of the study of positive organisations in general and leadership in particular by providing useful monitoring data to leadership on initial and over time satisfaction of learners (Godin, 2008; Marujo & Neto, 2019; Santos, 2020; Pordata,

2021). The study data are relevant from Martin Seligman's perspective of positive organizations (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005; Galinha, 2020).

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Conclusion

The results reveal that these senior universities are mainly attended by women (71.85%), aged between 65-74 years (57.1%), married (65.26%), with an income between 401-1000€ (41.54%). There is a moderate positive correlation ( $\rho=0.62$ ) statistically significant ( $p\text{-value}=0$ ) between monthly income and schooling of senior students. It is found that the prioritization of seniors' interests is matched. That is: there is a connection between the respondents' interests in attending SU, what the students consider important for their attendance and the perceived gains. In other words: the possibility for seniors to remain active, acquire new knowledge, socialise and keep themselves busy are the main reasons given for enrolling/attending. In the same vein, when seniors attend university they reveal the importance attributed to staying active, socialising and learning themes. There is also coherence regarding the perceived benefits since there is data on seniors continuing to lead an active life, have more knowledge and improve their mental health. Cross-sectional consistency is verified which predicts retention as learners since expectations and reality are associated. These data are important in light of the study of positive organisations in general and leadership in particular as they provide useful monitoring data to leadership on initial and over time satisfaction of learners. The benefits of this study include the sociodemographic profile of students at the Senior Universities, as well as the knowledge of the reasons, importance and benefits of attending classes at this educational organisation that promotes the well-being of its students. We suggest in future research a multicentric study, where this type of educational organizations with a positive approach from different countries may be represented, particularly Australia, Brazil and Spain, thus allowing a more holistic and comparative view where the inferential approach assumes greater prominence.

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