



## Third Age Universities in Portugal and Brazil: Characterization, Motivation and Health Impact

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### Abstract

Given the growth in the number of senior universities in Portugal and in Brazil, we think it is important to know the audience who frequents these institutions, their motivations, the health impact and whether there are significant differences between the two countries. The authors have created a survey that was applied in person in Portugal and in the State of Goiás in Brazil. With this study it was possible to trace the profile of the students who attend the Senior Universities (US or U3A) in Portugal and in one of the universities open to Seniors (UNATI) in Brazil.

We now know that are essentially women, aged 60-75 years and of all social and educational levels. As for the motives are essentially the conviviality, get active and learn. No significant differences were found between the two countries, in groups and in the motivations, with exception to the marital status and the number of courses attended.

**Keywords:** Depression; Lifelong learning; Non-formal education; Senior students; Senior University; UNATI

### Introduction

With the current and progressive ageing of the population in the West, in Portugal over the past three decades and more recently in Brazil, 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 pedagogical gerontology aims at the design and development of models and programs of education, stimulation, personal enrichment, training and instruction for people over 55 years old.

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.

Between adult education and the education for the elderly, there are significant differences, as the objectives and motivation (more professional and qualifying for adults, more playful and pleasant for the elderly), the duration of the class or classes and the methods to be used.

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 December 2017 326 Senior Universities recorded in Portugal in RUTIS (Network Association of Universities of the Third Age), according to the website of CASES and close to 50,000 students and 5,500 volunteer teachers.

The Senior Universities emerged in 1972 in France as specific educational movement for the seniors at the University of Toulouse, with Dr. Pierre Vellas (doctor and researcher, 1930-

2005). 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.

The Brazil is an example of a country that has adopted the French model, with some variants, because there are associations that offer activities for the elderly, mediated by volunteers.

The Social Service of Trading National Learning (SESC) was the first institution in the 60 to implement programmes aimed at seniors. In 1977, in the city of Campinas, São Paulo SESC inaugurates the first “School for senior citizens”, in partnership with scientists at the University of Toulouse, taking as a reference a universal model of old age.

Torres and Carrião (2017) take up the history of Universities open to Seniors (UNATI) in Brazil, and mark, then, the SESC as empowering factor; in some ways, these early programs sought a “self identity without giving up scientific knowledge as an inspiration.” (Lima .2001, p. 57) [1].

In this way, social and pedagogical practices with elderly Brazilians have emerged and expanded in the decades of 80 and 90. Here the record that, contrary to Portugal, the UNATIs of Brazil are outreach programs of the universities. However, only in the year 1982 was born the first program for elderly linked to a higher education institution (HEI). The Center for the study of the Third Age (NETI) appeared at the Federal University of Santa Catarina, in the southern region of the country. In the same decade, in 1984, at the Federal University of Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, was the core of Integrated studies and Support for seniors (NIAT).

In the northeastern region of Brazil, in 1988, emerged the University without Borders. Finally, in 1992, at the Catholic University of Goiás (UCG), today the Pontifical, the UNATI project started, always with the purpose of facilitating the continued acquisition of new knowledge, in a perspective of education for sensitivity and responsibility “as well as the practice of freedom, universal in your character, and essential to the complete democratization of learning, characterized by your flexibility and diversity of content, with activities, methodologies and purposes open to time and space.” (Torres, 2017, 0.43) [2]. At present UNATI de Goiás has 172 students and 15 subjects.

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 76/2016).

In April 2016 in the Protocol between RUTIS and the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security one can read 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. It can be seen that the frequency of these structures has an impact on changing lifestyles, providing benefits at various levels: increasing the knowledge acquired, particularly through the increase of the general culture and the lack of improvement continuous learning capacities, as well as the promotion of healthy lifestyles, through the practice of physical activity and balanced eating habits. 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.” [3].

Several scientific studies and academic, demonstrate and confirm that attending a senior University enhances the quality of life of its regulars, improves your general health, reduces feelings of depression and isolation, diminishes the consumption of medicines and increases social integration [4,5,6,7].

## Materials and Methods

To meet the students, do 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. In Portugal the questionnaire was applied to 114 people from all over the country, in the months of February and March 2018 and in Brazil the 99 students of the state of Goiás, in the months of February and March 2018.

In the study on depression the short version of 15 questions of Geriatric Depression Scale of Yesavage was applied. This scale is used for the screening of depression, assessing cognitive and behavioral aspects typically affected in the depression of the elderly.

This work is part of a more in-depth study about the US in Portugal in which will be online more than 1.000 senior students between February and May 2018 and whose results will be present at the end of this year.

## Results of the Student’s Characterisation

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

Data	Portugal	Goiás / Brazil
Participants	114	90
Gender	Female - 78.6% Male - 21.4%	Female - 85.6% Male - 14,4%
Age:	50-54 - 4.5% 55-59 - 3.5% 60-64 - 23.7% 65-69 - 20.1% 70-74 - 25.6% 75-79 - 17.6% 80-84 - 3% 85-90 - 2%	50-54 - 3.3% 55-59 - 3.3% 60-65 - 25.6% 65-69 - 23.3% 70-74 - 25.6% 75-79 - 16.7% 80-84 - 1.1% 85-90 - 1.1%
Professional situation	Retired - 90.5% Working - 9.5%	Retired - 87.5% Working - 12.5%
Marital status	Married - 62.9% Widowers - 21.2% Single - 8.8% Divorced - 6.2% United in fact - 0.9%	Married - 28.9% Widowers - 32.2% Single - 16.7% Divorced - 18.9% United in fact- 3.3%
Main places of residence	Coimbra, Aveiro, Viseu and Guarda districts- 54.9% Beja, Évora, Setúbal and Portalegre districts- 17.7% Viana do Castelo, Vila Real, Bragança and Braga districts - 11.5% Santarém, Leiria and Castelo Branco districts - 9.7% Other districts - 6.2%	Goiana - 88.9% Aparecida de Goiânia - 6.7% Senado Canedo- 3.3% Others - 1.1%
Days attending US	1 day - 11.8% 2 days -35.5% 3 days - 22.7% 4 days - 23.6% 5 days - 6.4%	1 day - 11.1% 2 days - 36.7% 3 days - 27.8% 4 days - 22.2% 5 days - 2.2%
Number of classes attended	1 - 5.9% 2 - 23.8% 3 - 23.8% 4 - 17.8% 5 - 15.8% More than 6 - 12.9%	1 - 31.1% 2 - 35.6% 3 - 31.1% 4 - 2.2% 5 - 0% More than 6 - 0%

**Table 1:** Characterization of senior students in Portugal and in Goiás / Brazil.

Regarding the Portuguese students the data collected by the authors does not differ much to the statistics in RUTIS' management program that had 17057 students registered on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January 2018, as well as age, educational level, gender and professional activity (RUTIS management).

The big differences seen between Portuguese and Brazilian students were the marital status that was much more diverse in Brazilians and the number of classes attended. The Portuguese students attend much more classes than the Brazilian students, for example 21,7% of the Portuguese students attend 5 or more classes opposed to 0% of the Brazilians to the same number of classes.

Regarding the educational level the groups are very heterogenous. The highlight goes to the students with the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade and between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade in Portugal and high school or higher education in Brazil.

In the case of personal monthly income, as well as educational level the groups are very heterogenous. In Portugal the highest percentages go to the income between 700 and 900 euros, almost double the average pension of the seniors in 2017, 364 euros (source: Prodata).

In Goiás / Brazil the biggest group is the one with minimum wage (954 reais in 2018 or 237 euros in Globe Economy) followed by 1200 to 3000 reais. 1 Euro corresponded to 4,02 reais in March 2018.

With these results we can state that the US and UNATI reach the entire spectrum of seniors, especially women, that most attend the US more than 3 days and that they attend in average 3 to 4 classes.

## 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 consist end with the existing literature. According to Frank (2009, 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%). In Goiás / Brazil the main motivations were, in order: keep active (70%); Learn and knowledge acquisition in general (66%) and meet new people/socialization (65%). So, in Portugal and in Brazil the 3 major factors found was the same and there are "keep active,

learn and acquire new knowledge and meet new people and be busy. The biggest differences between countries are in "Follow the husband or wife" and "make trips and tours". These items are more important to the Portuguese's.

## 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. On average the positive impacts are more felt by the Brazilian students. We can see that the impact of the frequency of US / UNATI on the health of the elderly is quite significant, as we can see in the following table.

Question	Portugal	Goiás/Brazil
In relation to your general health condition, you think that:		
Improved:	61.3%	63.3%
Worsened:	0.9%	2.2%
It was the same:	37.7%	34.4%
Impact on mental health:		
It has improved a lot	51%	68%
Improved	40%	19%
No impact	9%	13%
Your consumption of medications towards anxiety, depression and sleeping issues after attending university:		
Increased:	11.1%	4.5%
Decreased:	22,2%	36.4%
It was the same:	66.7%	59.1%

**Table 2:** Health impact in Portugal and Brazil.

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, either in Portugal or in Brazil.

	Portugal	Goiás / Brazil	Brazil*	Portugal
Without depression	97%	94%	65.6%	57%
Mild depression	3%	4%	34.4%	43%
Severe depression	0%	2%		

\* Sintomas depressivos em idosos: análise dos itens da Escala de Depressão Geriátrica (Depressive symptoms in the elderly: analysis of the items of the Geriatric Depression Scale)

<http://www.redalyc.org/html/3070/307023889003/>, 2012

\*\* Depressão em idosos: prevalência e fatores associados (Depression in elderly: prevalence and associated factors)

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

**Table 3:** Percentage of depression in the elderly in Portugal and Brazil.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study shows that the US and the UNATI, although they follow different models, in Portugal closer to the English model and in Brazil closer to the French model, they have similar publics and impacts. 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's 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 / UNATI, the consumption of anxiety medications has dropped significantly, and the levels of depression are very low.

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