

Older adult's education in community: Learning after the retirement

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Abstract

In this paper we will intend to debate issues about older adults, learning after retirement and well-being. As we know, the world's population is ageing rapidly. In this sense, ageing has a deeply impact on some aspects of human life, such as social, economic, cultural and others domains. We focus on adults older than 65 years old, who after retirement decided to become a 'student' in a Third Age University. Our particular goal is to understand this process and to explore the effects of learning on retirees well-being people. Taking into account the reflection about learning after retirement, we will present the results of four semi-interviews with older adults, who participate in educational activities developed by this institution. Our paper aims to present this university, their activities, events, students and, mainly, their role in learning of older adults.

Keywords: Older adults, Learning, Retirement, Well-being

Introduction

Nowadays, global ageing is not an isolated event, since it emerges in the context of globalization. In this sense, ageing process in developed societies should be from the improvement of live conditions. There is a significant increase in average life expectancy. In this way, demographic aspects (ex. life expectancy; reduced number of birth rates) are seen as a structural phenomenon. So, the debate on the issue of elderly people in society is quite significant, given the demographic situation in Portugal. Indeed, world population has been ageing at a rapid rate due to the decreasing number of young people and an aging population. Similar to other countries, Portugal is confronted with a progressive increase, in other words, demographic aging. Thus, ageing requires us to rethink the transition from working life to old age. It represents a 'great' challenge in terms of sustainability for the economic and social development.

According to Boulton-Lewis (2010), older adults needs and also want to learn. In fact, they want to stay informed and, at the same time, to enjoy life to the best of their ability. In this line of thought, this paper intends to be a contribution to a deeper understanding of this 'new' reality – Learning after retirement. Thus, it is important to understand how learning influences the well-being. Taking into account the reflection about learning after retirement, we also intend to understand this complex process and explore the effects of learning on retired well-being.

Theoretical Framework

At present, ageing societies are based on knowledge where adult education has assumed more significantly. However, old age is seen as an enigma or a mystery of life. So, aging with autonomy, independence, good physical and psychological health and active social role helps or contributes to promote a good quality of life (Santos, 2008). The aging phenomenon can have serious repercussions in the elderly. The entry in retirement is, for example, one of the most difficult to overcome. For the most of people, retiring symbolizes a "big and special" moment in their lives. In fact, retirement promote many consequences in life, particularly social relations, loneliness, learning, well-being, among others. Our society is changing in the "knowledge of older people left largely to be regarded by most as a new valuable reserve of wisdom, from just being seen as outdated" (Giddens, 2004, p. 165). As a new cycle of change, the retirement involves a reflection on the acquisitions of knowledge, competences and skills.

Since the learning is a continuous process, we should highlight the pleasure to knowledge and the cognitive, social, physical development of the potential of older adults (Machado & Medina, 2011). As a literature review, learning is a lifelong process and it's important to well-being. So, nowadays, well-being is very important in our lives. However, it's necessary to clarify the concept well-being. According to King (2007, p. 10) the concept well-being is used in different areas of research, it concerns to "specific domains of well-being, such as economic, material, social, and psychological, to all domains impacting upon people". Due to the aging world population, people living more. It is therefore important to ensure that the elderly have a good quality subjective experience of life particularly well-being. In the last years, many studies have researched the well-being in old age. And many studies considered old age as a period

of opportunity and well-being. For Dzuka and Dalbert (2006), these studies classified three groups of predictors, for example, socio-demographic factors, social support and personality traits.

On the other hand, quality of life is regarded as a 'product' indicator of well-being. At present, quality of life is a complex and dynamic concept, because it includes the 'conditions of life and life experience'. The first element refers to external factors (incomes) that influence the way which individual's experiences and evaluates their lives. The second element is also designed as subjective well-being. The relationship between well-being and personal goals has been studied by some researchers. In this way, the materials and personal resources seem to influence, indirectly, the goals (Diener & Fujita, 1995, as cited by Simões et al., 2001).

Thus, it is essential intervene to create better living conditions in this population to improve their quality of life. In this context of social intervention in the elderly is, essential, to promote their autonomy and their active participation in society. Consequently, this will contribute to increase self-esteem and interpersonal relationships. It is in this way that institutions addressed to older people emerge, such as the Third Age University. According to Trilla (2004), this initiative arises from educational gerontology "it is essentially to help the old people can plan strategies for the aging, to promote new interests and new activities to stimulate and train the physical vitality and occupy usefully large leisure available" (p. 252).

Third Age University give now the opportunity to elderly to acquire knowledge, and personal and social skills, hence, encouraging social interaction and well-being. These Universities allow to older adults to acquire more knowledge, personal and social skills, social interaction and well-being.

According to Field (2009), older adults who continue to learn new information have developed well-being, involving civic participation. The overall aim of this paper is to analyse the nature and benefits of people after retirement related to well-being, considering and, at the same time, the role learning played in active ageing. The common idea is to think that after the retirement, the adults felt more lowliness, sadness, dependent and low self-esteem. Finally, we can also say that higher levels of adult literacy can contribute to a competitive economy, promoting lifelong learning and well-being. In this line of thought, learning is a complex process that raises some questions: Can retirement and learning promote the well-being? Can learning be an important component of well-being? What is the impact of learning after retirement on well-being? What kind of experiences can contribute to retired well-being?

Methodology and Research Context

This is an exploratory research and we decided to use a qualitative research to study the benefits of learning in Third Age University and the impact in their well-being. So, we conducted four semi-structured interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994) with retiree's people, who in their daily activities participate in this university. In this sense, the next table (see table 1) show us some characteristics of our interviewees.

Table 1 - Characteristics of the interviewees

Name	Age	School	Last occupation
Mary	65	11 th grade	Monitor professional
Anne	67	9 th grade	Technique of Informatics
Frank	67	12 th grade	2 nd Year of Civil Engineering
John	71	4 th grade	Military officer

Source: Own

In addition to interviews we established informal conversations with a President of the Third Age University to explain our study, to contact with our interviewees and to know the institution (goals, activities, students, among others). A Third Age University, located in the south of Algarve (Faro), will be our research context. The University of a Third Age is, therefore, a “social response, developed in equipment(s), which aims to develop and encourage regular cultural, educational and convivial, and the highest for 50 years, in the context of lifelong training, in non-formal” (RUTIS).

Founded in 1992, the Third Age University in University of the Algarve is a privilege place to inclusion and social participation of older adults. Through different activities, in particular, classes, volunteering, theatre group, visits, meetings, events, among others, the older adults feel actives and happy with their lives. The classes are given by teachers and professionals, who are voluntaries that share their knowledge with older adults. Currently it has 205 senior students with aged 65 to 85 years. Concerning the goals of Third Age University, there are: promotion, enhancement and integration of older adult; leisure time; combat isolation, among others. The courses are Portuguese literature, law, philosophy, German, English, Spanish, among others. Thus, senior students can attend classes that they find interesting.

Opportunities for older adults’ learning: Aging with pleasure...

The retirement should be seen as a transition and not a state. Currently, the retirement is an opportunity to do things because has time for that. Thus, the senior should prepare for their retirement, for example, through activities that may come to do. In particular case of Mary, she asked herself about what will it happen next, during their active life “(...) we know that there are universities for third age, and since the moment that a person is retired, we say: What will I do next?”. Another interviewee (Anne), stress to the possibility of this Third Age University represents a ‘right space’ where she can occupy her free time. She started at this university when she was working. Her main goal was “to acquire more knowledge and enrichments, it was the combination of two”. Before this university, Mary and Anne had as projects to retirement: meetings, travelling, and theatre group, among other.

Concerning motivations to Third Age University, these are older learners who really want to learn. No one is forced to learn, everyone have the power and the right to decide which disciplines they want to do or participate:

“(...) this is only to occupy my time, to socialize, to spend time cheerfully get the most, but not overburdening our lives.” (Mary)

“It’s not for study, it serves to capture all knowledge, it is not to study ..., I took a lot of knowledge of the discipline of law for my life from day to day.” (Anne)

These are strategies that, definitely, to have an impact on well-being in retirement. In particular case of this university, there are several activities and disciplines. These activities - events, visits, meetings – aim to encourage the elderly to undertake certain activities that contribute to its development and this provides a sense of belonging to a society.

“There are so many activities; we have so much to choose that sometimes we have difficulty” (Anne)

“It’s a pity, because we can attend all of them, we can’t stay here all day, so, we are choosing some disciplines, I think that people who like to sing should choose ‘choral singing’ I like to learn languages” (Mary)

And the several educational activities or disciplines intend to mobilize knowledge, to socialize, and to meet new friends. In this sense, we can identify older from ages and levels of education different, which means to prepare attractive lessons. For example, the favourite discipline of John is History – *“History, History of Portugal, and not only of Portugal but also about Algarve and History of Africa and Contemporary History and these are that I frequent now”*. We think that, maybe, can be related with his life course as Military officer. On another hand, these activities are very attractive with interest’s issues and, at the same time, with high levels of participation. These older adults point out that love its disciplines. So, they participate in the lessons. Anne told us that *“are very good disciplines, namely Law, I like Law, Psychology and History, they are so many.”* And Mary said that *“History of Africa is a wonderful lesson”*. The several disciplines (Law, Psychology, History, among others) provides a diversity of skills, which can influence their memory, health, life style and, lastly, active ageing. Another important issue is that some disciplines are adequate to real context that they live now. Thus, these disciplines give to older adults some knowledge and benefits to solve their problems, such rights human, languages skills, among others.

Our interviewees mentioned that their opinion of teachers is positive. Actually, they recognize that teachers are voluntaries and the quality of lessons. So, lessons are seen as informal conversations, debates, conferences. Third Age University is, therefore, seen as one place of social meeting that allows to increase their self-esteem and also provides will the desire to take care of himself. This group of older learner have and also they acquire a set of personal and social skills. It means that give them autonomy and independence. In fact, they highlight the social relations, mainly sharing of knowledge with colleagues and teachers; happiness and good disposition. Attending a Third Age University it’s important for autonomy of elder, because it helps the person to become more functional in daily routine. The gathering was one of the purposes referred by senior students. It was mentioned that they living with older people as a way to struggle loneliness and social isolation. In fact, this interaction made them to feel active, autonomous and essential.

“Here, we make conviviality” (Anne)

“We always have invitations... we have the coffee” (Mary)

“There are some gatherings, such as excursions or study visits...” (Frank)

Concerning to impact of this university in their lives, they stress the encouragement given by their family. Another issue is the well-being, as John said it means a “*voluntary learning*” and, mainly, the desire to learn in their leisure times. According to our interviewees, they mentioned the desire to learn and complete their leisure times. Nowadays, they highlight the benefits of receiving knowledge through lessons. For example, with lesson of Law, they learn much knowledge adequate to understand specific context, such as divorces, weddings, sharing of property, among others. And, consequently, that learning can be useful for their daily routine. The main reasons that they highlight were: learning, new skills and remember of another things or knowledge that they had forgot. According to Mary, she thinks that her participation contributes to be more “*arouse to reality*”. Lastly, we asked to ours interviewee the keywords that characterize this institution. So, they mentioned: meeting, good disposition, “*make the brain more active*” and pleasure.

Conclusion

Taking account the aging population, it is necessary to create an entire set of initiatives that promote active aging population. There are the Third Age Universities, which aim is to provide some autonomy and skills of older population. However, more important than learning is the need to socialize with each other, to exchange new experiences, among others. This institution is, therefore, a very attractive model for elderly, because it allows to them to take an active part in the community (such as teachers, volunteers, animators, among others). In this sense, makes their leisure time and, consequently, their lives become more interest and active.

Both members and students of Third Age University, give themselves ‘*body and soul*’ to this university. Older adults are motivated to learn for reasons of self-fulfilment and also pleasure (Boulton-Lewis, 2010). They mentioned that is important to continue learn because it influence and contribute to their mind active, mentally stimulated. So, is important “*never stop to learn*”. In fact, their motivation will be strong to promote new skills and knowledge. Concerning about the discourse of our interviewees, we can conclude the main motivations of these students are: desire to learning more, to complete leisure times, to increase relationships and to provide interaction in the classroom. These aspects contribute to maintain their focus about issues of nowadays.

It also important to stress a wide variety of experiences of participants in this study, because they have the ‘*power*’ to decide which disciplines they want to attend according to their life course. Another point is that university is, for older learners, a social place with learning, development and social valorisation. This strengthens a strong positive attitude about their lives and also a “*new glance over world*”.

In this sense, active ageing appears as the main concept of our research. The contact with a world of new knowledge, and several disciplines, that they like to attend, give

them more power and self-esteem to face the obstacles during their lives. They are extremely interested in learning. In contrast with the saying “Old man does not learn languages”, they are involved by a voluntary learning process.

In conclusion, older adults take a critical and active position in their lives, becoming more independent and autonomous. In reality, we live in an older society, so it is fundamental the existence of these universities. Therefore, we consider that the work of this institution is extremely relevant and positive because they provide answers to leisure times and social needs.

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