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Contents

European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, Vol.10,No.3, 2019, pp.247-260

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Abstract

In recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in studying various dimensions of ageing and learning based on various disciplinary approaches. Nevertheless, insufficient research attention has been paid to education and learning among older adults (over 65 years old). Similarly, researchers have placed insufficient focus on the impacts of older adults' learning and the benefits to their wellbeing. In this paper, we will present the results of a case study on a University of Third Age (U3A) in Portugal. We adopted an exploratory position, and our approach included documentary analysis, naturalistic observation, and semi-structured interviews. Our case study results revealed that this U3A is a non-formal learning space in which older adults are able to engage in different activities that stem from educative practices and socialisation between adults. In some cases, the U3A represents an opportunity to participate in an activity that individuals were unable to do earlier in their lives. However, without a space in which to socialise, such as a bar, it seems not difficult for new social networks to be generated and maintained. Such networks help to counteract older adults' isolation and loneliness. This fact gives us some important clues concerning the relationships between individuals' education, socialisation (social relations), and wellbeing.

Keywords: Older adults' education, socialisation, university of third age, wellbeing

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Older adults' education and lifelong learning: A general overview

In recent decades, significant international organisations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] have emphasised the need for continuous learning, and the boundaries of lifelong learning have continued to expand. The Delors' Report (1997) to UNESCO emphasised that in the face of 21st Century challenges, education plays an essential role:

> Education is at the heart of both personal and community development; its mission is to enable each of us, without exception, to develop all our talents to the full and to realize our creative potential, including responsibility for our own lives and achievement of our personal aims. (Delors, 1997, p.19)

This is the intuition on which the famous four pillars of education - learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be - are based. Furthermore, these items are fundamental to communication and the dissemination of information in our society, and they are so widely applicable that they include all people from children to older adults. Furthermore, permanent education can be understood as a process that occurs throughout the life of the individual, it interconnects the personal and social dimensions of education, and it is based on a humanistic system of collective values (Lengrand, 1970). Permanent education integrates the personal, social, and political dimensions of the individual and focuses on maintaining equality and the right to learn for all individuals throughout their lives. In this sense, education is seen as a basic social and human right (Lima, 2007; Pavan, 2008), which is based on the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948 - Article 21). The growth of social complexity has led to an increase in the demand for knowledge throughout life. The most recent UNESCO documents highlight this evolution by underlining the need to move from an *information society* to a *knowledge society*. A passage in one UNESCO document deserves particular attention: 'A knowledge society should be able to integrate all its members and to promote new forms of solidarity involving both present and future generations'. In a knowledge society, an important role for young people exists; however, the document refers explicitly to older adults as well, because 'they possess the experience required to offset the relative superficiality of "real-time" communication and remind us that knowledge is but a road to wisdom' (UNESCO, 2005, p. 18).

Education, including adult education, can address a wide range of issues and elicit at a wide range of responses. This diversity has led to Canário's (2000) typology, which describes a set of four interactive poles: literacy (or an educational second-chance offer), vocational training, local development, and sociocultural animation. The same author highlights the relationship between adult education and the life-course experience, and he considers education as 'a continuum that integrates and articulates different levels of formalization' (Canário, 2000, p. 80). This can be reflected in different activities that are developed in formal, non-formal, or informal contexts (Findsen, 2005; Porcarelli, 2009). Non-formal educational contexts are interesting because learning is often marked by its flexibility and the manner in which it adapts to different contexts, situations, and groups (Canário, 2000; Coombs, 1989). Non-formal learning is also the result of a creative auto-didactic activity, which is, in turn, often associated with non-hierarchical and equal relationships (Commissione delle Comunità Europee, 2000; Porcarelli, 2012). Sometimes it is also lived as a praxis of a group and can be individual as well as collective (Gohn, 1998). With regard to older adults, the issue of learning, is not solely about reflections on lifelong learning but also about what

the UN has devoted to the broader theme of a *society for all ages*. The first World Assembly on Aging, held in Vienna in 1982, approved an *International Plan of Action on Aging* (United Nations, 1983), which represents a milestone that is also related to subsequent documents, starting with the proclamation of the year of older persons in 1999 and the second World Assembly on Aging (ibid., 2002). In all of these documents, a great deal of attention is paid to possible actions concerning the education of older adults, emphasising objectives such as self-realisation and participation in social life. The fourth area of attention of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging is dedicated to accessing knowledge, education, and training. This issue highlights as a specific objective the 'full utilization of the potential and expertise of persons of all ages' (ibid., p. 16).

In recent years, different theories and approaches have been discussed by researchers regarding older adults' education and learning. Some fields, such as sociology and gerontology, approach this discussion from the standpoints of the functionalist approach and critical educational gerontology (Formosa, 2014; Veloso & Guimarães, 2014). In this sense, we move away from activity theory (i.e. finding new roles in later life to avoid mental or social decline) and towards the fact that for older adults, education can be an opportunity to promote social participation and active citizenship (Ripamonti, 2005). This follows the educational philosophy of Freire (2005), who supports social change within the framework of a *liberating education*. Some sociologists, such as Withnall (2002), have promoted the value of educational gerontology and the role of the Universities of the Third Age (U3As), arguing that learning and socialisation provide opportunities for older people to reinforce their social networks and strengthen their social capital (Veloso, 2011). Some researchers also studied the role of state and nongovernmental organisations in the promotion of education for seniors (Veloso, 2007; Zemaitaityté, 2014).

The ecological perspective within psycho-gerontology has considered a number of interrelated issues, including the implications of ageing for wider changes in behaviour, the importance of social networks for ageing, loneliness, and disability (Gasperi, 2016; Paúl, 2006; Ribeiro & Paúl, 2012). In the field of psychology, learning trajectories in later life were studied, and it was argued that learning has positive influences and effects on wellbeing (physical, psychological, social, emotional, and mental), self-esteem, and self-confidence (Machado & Medina, 2012; Pocinho, 2014). Studies in the pedagogical field tend to focus on topics such as frailty, active ageing, and intergenerational education and learning (Formosa, 2014; Gasperi, 2016; Tramma, 2017) but also on the proposal of a pedagogical approach that is based on the overall consideration of the course of life, which continuously redesigns its own pathways up to old age (Deluigi, 2008). Regarding education in later life, we can also find the wisdom of older adults (Jarvis, 2012) and the significance of older people's educational experiences (Gregianin, 2011), especially if they are configured as peer education experiences (Ellerani, 2010), in which the reciprocal gift of one's memories becomes an occasion for the co-construction of the older adult's evolving identity (Dozza, 2010). Starting precisely with these pedagogical reflections, we can identify the focus of our research, which is the educational practices used in the U3A, especially the most dynamic and interactive ones.

Learning and U3As in Portugal

According to the Adult Education Survey (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2013) in Portugal, non-participation in education, training, and learning was particularly high among older age groups (40.1% for ages 55 to 64 years, compared to 7.2% for ages 18 to 24 years) and less qualified persons (63.5% for those with no education level, compared to 5.2% for those with a tertiary education). Regarding the old age group, more than 65 years old, there seem to be two principal obstacles to participation—the priority of educational policies (which appear to be directed primarily towards vocational training and the labour market) and the fact that older adults do not assign a meaning to education and learning policies that follow European Union ideas. Consequently, in recent decades, reinforced by the increasing of the ageing, older adults' education has appeared to be an important field of practice and intervention. Nongovernmental organisations and the third sector, in Portugal, have developed projects based on non-formal activities to respond to the educational and social needs of older adults. According to Gohn (2006), these organisations have their own *know how* regarding methodologies, strategies, and programmes of action; they are supported by volunteer work and focus on the valorisation of local cultures. In this sense, the author views nongovernmental organisations as having played a central role in recent years (Gohn, 2006).

In Portugal, as in other countries, U3As have been assuming an important role when it comes to older adults' learning and education (Fragoso, 2014). Soon after the creation of the first university in France (1973) and supported by national self-organised movements and civic initiatives, the first U3A was established in Portugal in 1976 (Guimarães & Antunes, 2016) to address the lack of educational opportunities for older adults (Jacob, 2005). In recent decades, in Portugal but also in worldwide level, there has been a proliferation of these educational institutions. U3As have become one 'of the most successful institutions engaged in late-life learning' across the five continents' (Formosa, 2014, p. 42). Nowadays, the involvement of older adults in social and educational dynamics is visible. Furthermore, these U3As are locations in which individuals are able to spend their free time and avoid problems such as social isolation and marginalisation. Similarly, these contexts allow for the maintenance of participation in political, social, economic, and cultural activities (Zemaitaityté, 2014). Consequently, older adults can live and take part in a world that is constantly changing and are able to do so not only as spectators but also as active and intervening subjects (Formosa, 2011, 2019). The U3A emerged as a response for our days and as an opportunity for older adults (in the field of education and learning, as well as in regard to social relations). It gives them opportunities to get together, find groups, and help each other by teaching and learning new things. The most important premise in these contexts is freedom. These older adults participate because they want to, and they do what they want when they want. They also have opportunities to improve their expertise in different areas of interest and willingness to live better they life (Zemaitaityté, 2014).

Older adults' education and wellbeing

In recent years, researchers have shown an increased interest in studying the wellbeing of individuals and specifically of adults in later life. The intention of these studies was to understand the relationship between learning in later life and life satisfaction (DeNeve, Diener, Tay, & Xuereb, 2013; Formosa, 2014). The results of these studies

reveal that older adults can find meaning and satisfaction in their lives through learning and learning contexts (Field, 2009).

Well-being can be discussed from different perspectives. Some authors (e.g. Simões et al., 2003) refer to wellbeing as related to the notion of quality of life, which includes the conditions of life and life experience. The World Health Organization (2012) proposed a definition of wellbeing that constitutes two dimensions: objective and subjective. It includes factors such as life experience and life circumstances, which entail social norms and values: 'Subjective wellbeing comprises all the various evaluations, positive and negative, that people make on their lives and the affective reactions of people to their experiences' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012, p. 8). Well-being and health, which are correlated, are also subjected to other determinants, such as social systems and life circumstances (i.e. education, work, social relationships, and environments). All of these circumstances can influence wellbeing, psychological functioning, and the affective state (World Health Organization, 2012). Subjective wellbeing can have a constructive effect on health and longevity, the quality of social relationships, and work outcomes (DeNeve et al., 2013). It is positively associated with health, high levels of social and civic engagement, and greater resilience when facing external crises (Field, 2009). Some research and recent practices for adults have shown that education and learning in later life has enormous potential for participants' lives (Field, 2009). People, regardless of age, need to be in constant contact with learning activities This not only contributes at the individual level, directly influencing the attitudes and behaviours that affect mental wellbeing (Field, 2009), but also facilitates the development of the community. Learning can help to increase older adults' abilities to do things for themselves and can improve their levels of social and personal transformation (Formosa, 2014).

Older adults should not be seen nor see themselves as a separate group from society, 'but instead should be integrated in the community whilst, of course, ensuring that their specific needs and interests are met' (Formosa, 2014, p. 16). Learning processes can build networks, trust, reciprocity, and social connections. This means that older adults can go further in their life opportunities if they participate in society, cooperating each other, with the younger groups or social institutions. For older adults' inclusion is a central aspect (ibid.). Nevertheless, learning in later life can bring new possibilities, mainly in regard to the family (e.g. relationships with grandchildren), the neighbourhood (close community), and peers (social group). The participation of older adults in U3A activities seems to increase their physical, intellectual, and social outcomes (Formosa, 2014) and, consequently, their quality of life (Jacob, 2012). In this sense, participation promotes social integration and the development of productive, meaningful lives while enhancing older adults' knowledge and cultures (Zemaitaityté, 2014).

The research context and methodology

This study, which is part of an ongoing body of research titled *Educative Practices in Universities of the Third Age: A Comparative Study between Portugal and Italy* which aims to analyse the educative practices and dynamics of socialisation between different U3As. Our first objective in regard to methods was to obtain a database of the national U3As (November 2015 to February 2016). To achieve this aim, we established contact with networks and associations operating at the national level in Portugal and Italy, and we requested collaboration. After some months and more than 600 requests for

cooperation, we built a database of approximately 200 institutions. Hence, to obtain preliminary information on the reality of the U3A in Portugal, some informal conversations were had, and a national survey was created and sent to each contact of our database (Ghiglione & Matalon, 1997). This survey was about the aims, organisation, and educative work of U3As. We then defined some criteria, such as educational aims and type of activities, and we selected a few U3As to enable us to conduct an-depth case study.

This paper reports on a case study that was developed at one U3A in Portugal. This U3A is situated in the Lisbon region in one of the six most populated cities in Portugal. Our primary aim was to understand the case (Stake, 1994) - that is, to determine (a) whether older adults merely follow what has been predetermined by others or actively participate in the planning and development of such activities, and (b) whether relationships exist between participants' learning, socialisation, and wellbeing. We had informal conversations with different U3A participants to gain deeper insight into empirical practices. This was fundamental to establish an informal relationship and to enable natural observation of the U3A. Observation (Bell, 1997; Yin, 2002) of the U3A was conducted at various times and during different lessons. We performed two weeks of naturalistic observation involving more than 28 courses. During our observations, we attempted to determine the type of activity, the space in which it was conducted, the methodology used, and the participants (who were the adults in the courses and the relationships among them). Our approach also included 20 semi-structured interviews with different participants: those with direct responsibilities for or experience of the evolution of this U3A, adults that perform educators or learners in different activities, and learners. This led to important documentary analysis. Besides the institutional documents (member files, calendar of lessons, regulations, etc.), this university has a monthly journal, which started in the first month of its existence.

Findings

Our observations and interviews provided elements of four central themes - namely, the nature of the institution, the type of work that the U3A carries out, the participants involved in the U3A, and most interestingly the dynamics of socialisation and learning - that is, how they are developed in this U3A and the relationship between them.

D. Sancho I University: A brief description

This U3A, which is located in the city of Almada, was founded in 2013 by a group of nine friends. Initially, they were enrolled at other universities in the city, but for reasons related to the organisation and the way in which it functions – 'It was like a service, and we were just clients' (Coordinator, female, 67) - they decided to create a new one that could respond to their personal beliefs. The main idea was to create an alternative for the older people in the region: 'a U3A that could be open to all, autonomous and self-sustainable' (President, male, 69). After the initial idea, a snowball effect started, as people's friends and neighbours were called. This U3A started to preparing and organisational work in May and opened in September 2013 with a total of 500 enrolments and 40 different disciplines. By the end of that same year, the participants totalled 1,000. The resource issues were easily resolved, as once they found a space, items started to arrive: 'We went to look for furniture, and we got it…One of the

collaborators was working at a bank, and he got them to give us the first desks, the first computers, [and] the first chairs. We had all that!' (coordinator, female, 67).

The main aims described in the internal regulation (Regulamento Interno da TKM, 2016) are as follows: to offer a space that is adaptable and that can enable socialisation; to give participants the opportunity to enrol in courses in which they can share their experiences, be valorised, and improve their knowledge; to develop activities with and for learners; to create meeting spaces within the community; and to explore and preserve the history, culture, traditions, and values of the city. Moreover, it is important to focus on the awareness of the identity of this U3A. The adults in the several courses created a logo, a flag, and a hymn to identify the university and to be used in different situations such as cultural visits or events. An important reason for their success seems to be related to the fact that participants feel as if they belong to a wider group:

> [It] is the feeling of belonging…to feel that we are the D. Sancho. To be proud to be…to be D. Sancho!...When we go on our field visits [and] big trips, we always bring our symbols…our flag! We bring name tags! We go all identified, because to be D. Sancho is something different…and that is why it is special. (Coordinator, female, 67)

The U3A is autonomous, and the financial support that it receives is based on the enrolment fees that are paid by the participants, which change, depending on the number of disciplines they pursue. The fact that the U3A receives no money from outside sources gives it the privilege of being free to admit all participants, regardless of their religion, political affiliation, and so forth. In fact, this freedom allows the U3A to do the work that it wants to, participate in the activities that it wants to, and make its own decisions without having to face external pressure.

Currently, this U3A is one of the biggest in the country, and has received several rewards from inter universities competitions and a recognition of merit from a national association. When comparing it with other similar contexts, we find two particularities that seem to contribute to this U3A's success. First, besides the 'normal parties,' such as national festivities, this U3A organise the end of year party in the 31 December. This started as an activity for the old adults that were alone that night, and now, it always has more followers, which is becoming problematic for the organisation. The directive organises a shared dinner, to which each attendee brings something as a meal or some drinks, and they spend hours together in a pleasant environment. Second, the university never closes its doors. During the months that the place is closed (i.e. there are no 'normal' classes), there is the possibility of participating in leisure and cultural activities (in July and August): 'This year, we will have three big trips: to Russia, Norway, and Croatia'. (coordinator, female, 67)

The participants in the U3A

During the 2017/2018 academic year, there were approximately 1,300 participants, aged between 31 and more than 80 years old. The group with members aged 61 to 80 had the most members. Most of the participants (70%) are female, although for some courses (as naval Art or Golf), the majority of the participants are male. The participants have diverse educational backgrounds: most completed secondary school, some never attended school, and others hold master's degrees or PhDs. This U3A also relies on a group of 65 volunteer educators of diverse ages (26 to 80 years), genders (60% female and 40% male), and educational backgrounds (from basic school to PhD level). Some are unemployed or retired, but most are still active in the workforce.

The coordinator of the U3A distinguishes between two types of participants (learners): those who 'come, sit, hear what they have to hear, and then go away' and those who come to participate and learn: "They bring the things home, study, make up questions, and want to have debates and discussions on the lesson with their colleagues and the professor' (Coordinator, female, 67). Regarding the motivation to participate in the U3A, the main one that is common to all participants is that occupying one's free time is helpful at this stage of life and keeps the 'mind working': 'To distract myself…I had a really communicative job. I dealt with people and companies, and then staying home was not an option…Now, I'm addicted (laughs). I came here to talk, speak…' (Learner, female, 74). According to another participant,

> The people maintain some kind of activity, and then we can also develop something that stays a little…It helps us…helps us to live!...Also, [it lifts] our spirit. I, for example, look for myself, and I say that…I don't think I feel the age that I am. (Learner, female, 71)

In some cases, doctors recommend that their patients attend a U3A: 'They (the doctors) come here, ask for the curricula for all the courses, and send their patients to the disciplines they consider good for them! They prefer to prescribe the U3A instead of medicines' (laughs) (Coordinator, female, 67). In these cases, we can refer to the work developed by the U3A as a way to fight ageism and social exclusion (Formosa, 2014) and prevent some psychological diseases (Pocinho, 2014). Considering the various reasons for participation noted in the interviews, the adults can be divided into different groups:

- Those who seek to engage in a similar activity to what they used to do in their jobs - for example, Portuguese teachers seeking creative-writing courses;
- Those who seek something that differs as much as possible from their past jobs - for example, ex-healthcare workers (such as nurses) seeking manual activities, such as seamwork or embroidery;
- Those who seek opportunities they missed due to economic or political/historical factors, for example, an individual who has always loved singing can now pursue his or her passion (and even win some friendly competitions): 'I didn't fight for that [to be a singer]. The truth is that I've never done what I've liked…until now' (learner, male, 68); or it could be someone who has always wanted to play a musical instrument but could not because of gender issues: 'At the time, little girls didn't have the opportunity to learn music…and I couldn't learn music (crying)…I cried so much, so much, so much. I wanted to leave my city' (learner, female, 71); and
- Those who never went to school and the non-Portuguese-speaking immigrants taking courses such as Learning Portuguese and Portuguese for Foreigners.

These last two groups of participants embody the fact that the U3A is a way to realise dreams that were previously out of reach for various reasons. It seems to be a valuable answer, as in addition to being a rich context for knowledge acquisition and retention, it seems to create opportunities for individuals to fulfil goals that they were unable to achieve earlier in their lives. This U3A also reveals the importance of not only a basic service but also, in some cases, an answer for the community.

The U3A as a space for adult education and learning

This U3A describes itself as having an educative project that is flexible (not defined a priori), concerns a non-formal perspective, uses a horizontal work methodology and grants opportunities to participate in recreational activities (U3A Survey). Based on the responses to the survey and the interview with the coordinator, it can also be concluded that the main aims of this U3A are to develop affection between adults participating, fight a sedentary lifestyle, and facilitate lifelong learning. The educative approaches present in this U3A seem to differ, depending on the activity, field, and educator.

The activities of this U3A are separated into two major categories: courses and cultural activities. In the first category, courses, we can find diverse fields. These are as follows: (a) the performing arts (theatre, dance, poetry, etc.), (b) the artistic strand (painting, ceramics, drawing, etc.), and (c) cognitive development (languages, history, sociology, psychology, etc.). These categories total 70 different activities and courses. Concerning the second category—cultural activities—there are one-off conferences, lunches, field visits, trips (national and international), theme parties, expositions, and festivities. The members are free to participate in the activities and to choose where they want to go and what they would like to do: 'The choice is so wide that all the people can fit here' (learner, female, 67). Additionally, they have a major responsibility, as they are involved in the dynamisation of a significant portion of the activities. Interestingly, a substantial number of the educators (among those who are retired or unemployed) are learners. While they deliver their lessons as educators, they are also members of the U3A themselves, attending other courses as learners. Further to this educator–learner dynamic, it is interesting that a significant portion of U3A participants are simultaneously educators and learners as they share their professional and personal experiences and contribute to the activities: 'They learn together from each other!' (Educator, male, 71). Below some examples of an educator who seems to give total freedom for participation in his class:

> My idea is not to exhaust the issues…[it] is to raise the issues…then, the ones who want to (because all are free in my lessons) can debate with me or individually conduct research at home. (educator, male, 71)

I had a programme in my class that was [called] '3 Minutes of Fame,' and each person had to present a theme with a beginning, middle, and end. Really nice thing…how to make glass…how to fix the alternator of a car…and a lady said, 'I can't, Professor. I don't know anything!' 'You don't know anything? So, what have you done until now?' 'Ah, I was a dressmaker…'So, that's what you are going to do - teach the class how to make a dress.' Look, it was a success in terms of the way that I asked her to write it, and then it was published. (educator, male, 71)

In some cases, the younger participants (30-40 years old) are unemployed or have jobs that require them to be stationary for some months (e.g. airplane hostesses). This type of participant seeks the U3A to enable him or her to update or acquire knowledge. This U3A is not a closed institution. It is open to all and can be seen as a service for the community. This U3A accepts everyone who is interested in its activities; it listens to participants; it is open to learners' expectations and opinions about the activities, some of which are in place merely because the participants suggested them; and it offers a wide variety of choices (more than 70 courses). Additionally, 'If someone is not happy, they can always change' (coordinator, female, 67), as liberty is a key concept of the U3A.

The U3A as a space for meeting and socialising

If we consider that one aim of the regulations governing this U3A is 'to offer a space [that is] adapted and which could potentiate the socialisation' (U3A Regulation 2016, p.1), one thought-provoking point regarding socialisation is the lack of a space, such as a bar or meeting room. Initially, the fact that participants have nowhere to drink a coffee, sit, and talk might seem contradictory or problematic. However, the richness of the activities and courses that are offered seems to counterbalance this issue. Furthermore, this is the perfect reason for participants to meet outside of the U3A structure. Participants find spaces to be together even when lessons are done: 'We go for a snack or drink together, and occasionally, we meet up to have lunch' (learner, male, 68). This U3A's educational offerings are diverse, and it is a meeting and socialisation point for older adults: 'For me, the senior university represents a way to keep [my] free time busy, as we are retired. Here, we aim to keep active cognitively [and to maintain] social relations' (educator and learner, male, 71). In this context, older adults can make friends among participants who might have similar tastes and mindsets. They can also find participants with different ideas and with whom they can engage in healthy debates. Interestingly, they have a common aim: 'to belong to this family' (Coordinator, female, 67). In some cases, they are enrolled in the same courses for several years, and they form solid groups whose members participate in activities together: 'We are known as the troika' (learner, female, 71).

Participation benefits and wellbeing in the U3A

Based on the interviews, participation in the learning and cultural activities seems to be positive for the adults, contributing for their wellbeing: 'It's really special to me in the sense of escaping from the routine and getting out of the house, then people are nice' (learner, female, 74); 'I think the majority of the people like being here. We are always more people' (learner, male, 70); and '[The U3A is a place] where they want to look for knowledge, social contact, physical activity, and leisure. So, people can look for this place' (educator, male, 71). Friendships, family, and social relationships also seem to be of the utmost importance for the wellbeing of participants in this U3A: 'This story [event] of the creation of the U3As was eventually one of the most beneficial things for the older adults. The older adults are able to spend their time living and ageing with quality' [maintaining a good quality of life] (educator, male, 71). Additionally, this U3A reveals the possibility of the share between grandparents and grandchildren—for example, when a grandmother can debate with her grandchild about history or geography while doing homework. The older adults seem to be motivated to learn. Learning seems to give them the possibility of finding new roles, as well as new possibilities in regard to both family and peers: 'I have one aim in my day: at eleven o'clock, I have to go to the dance lesson, and then, at five o'clock, I have my theatre lesson! This is my motivation for the day' (Learner, female, 74); or another example:

> The U3A makes me manage my time better…I have obligations, duties, and responsibilities. I have things to do…Consequently, I have to manage my time. It helps me and makes me more organised inclusively [and] on a personal level, and that's great! (learner, female, 71)

Upon analysing the interviews, we also saw examples that relate to participation in the U3A and how it affects the wellbeing of the individuals on several levels such as:

- Tending to one's health: 'Personally, I occupy my time, and, for example, when I'm here in the lessons, I'm not smoking, and that is, for sure, beneficial for me';
- Discovering new skills: 'The U3A helped me to discover things that I didn't know I was able to do. And that is good [and] fun' (learner, female, 65);
- Feeling valorised by learning with others: 'Culturally, it is really enriching, because we deal daily with people who have more culture than us (. . .) and that makes me feel valorised' (learner, female, 74);
- Fighting against prejudices and fears: 'This give me the possibility to open my mind, to learn new things, and to see the things from a different perspective' (Learner, female, 65) and 'I'm feeling more active [and] more self-confident! For example, I always hated to drive and go around by car, but now, to come here, I need to drive, right? (laughs) And that's it. I think it was really positive for me' (Educator and learner, female, 64).

Another benefit of participation in the U3A seems to be the connection that individuals create with the community; for example, one lady is learning Mandarin at the U3A because she wants to speak it with the owner of the supermarket that she goes to daily. This interviewee refers to it as a personal challenge not only regarding the language and culture but also her capacity to learn and to increase ties with her own community. Furthermore, the U3A participants seem to enhance the social environment: they constitute a small community and establish important ties with the larger community. Besides all the activities (e.g. conferences, travels, expositions, and lunches) that are open to the family members and the entire community, other indicators point to this. First, partnerships with other institutions (e.g. agreements with golf and theatre associations and with different schools) make some of the activities possible. Second, U3A participants provide assistance to the city's social institutions. For example, older adults work as volunteers at several institutions and participate in municipal initiatives; they perform with the choir or theatre at care centres (visiting the elderly), hospitals, and so on, and they collaborate with law enforcement officers and firemen in the city as they conduct their activities. Based on the interviews, older adults seem to evaluate their U3A experience positively, declaring that it is improving their health, lifestyle, and social and civic engagement (Field, 2009). Finally, the U3A also has an agreement with a SPA in the city, which offers different benefits and various services and spaces (pool, massages, treatments, etc.), providing yet another method of maintaining individuals' wellbeing.

Final Considerations

Some obstacles and limitations exist regarding older adults' participation in lifelong learning and education. These relate primarily to the prioritisation of educational policies and processes that do not concern adults' nor older adults' education and the fact that few field studies have been conducted on older adults' education and learning. Besides the documents and literature that have been available in recent years, it is impossible to find a political proposal or a practical response regarding older adults' education and learning (Veloso, 2011). In keeping with the concept of development and social cohesion, which, in our case study, is supported by the U3A regulations we can say that U3As have a strong responsibility to establish conditions that facilitate the participation of everyone. This institution offers a suitable environment, access for all,

and resources for such participation. Moreover, it gives the adults the freedom to engage in depth with each activity phase, from its conception to its realisation. Our case study revealed some interesting points concerning learning, socialisation, and wellbeing. Participation in this U3A has socialisation and learning as its main points that bring members together, and the result seems to be the wellbeing of individuals on a global level.

Participants are encouraged to volunteer within the U3A and in city activities, and they seem highly motivated to do so. It is important to recognise the empowering benefits of coordinating and participating in educational activities that connect older adults with people of all ages, including their peers, and of coordinating educational initiatives that increase cooperation, integration, and exchange among different generations (Formosa 2014, p. 18), as these older adults have a direct and constant relationship with the community. This is possible because the U3A seems to have specific characteristics. First, it is not elitist and is, in fact, quite the contrary. It is an open space with a flexible structure and is based, in terms of the activities on offer, on the adults' needs and ideas: They listen to the older adults and work as a team to find solutions to their problems. Additionally, the horizontal relationship between learners and educators makes participants feel good and enjoy attending the U3A. The closeness and equal relationships that exist among all the U3A members - management, educators, and learners - seem to contribute to the university's success. Individuals can participate in several ways - by offering suggestions, planning and designing activities, and participating in their enactment. They propose new partnerships with clubs and associations of the city and create their own projects to present. The U3A allows them to find new roles in their daily lives, and in some cases, it leads to greater participation and more active citizenship (Formosa, 2014). The feeling of belonging, the sharing of personal experiences, and the development of meaningful friendships seem to contribute significantly to the participants' wellbeing. Older adults feel that the U3A is their own space in which they are able to learn from each other.

In considering this U3A, we think that older adults' educational contexts can play a crucial role in the social and participatory challenge by including everybody and promoting opportunities to interact, engage in dialogue, and share experiences. The U3A also represents a space for socialisation, which is quite important for individuals' wellbeing. This U3A's activities are fundamental to promoting education and fighting isolation among older adults (Pocinho, 2014), as well as creating strong friendships, enabling social participation through activities, and reinforcing social networks (Veloso, 2011). According our data (that is, observation and interviews), the primary importance of the U3A is for older adults to meet and create social groups. Being together in a social network enables higher levels of personal and social wellbeing. Finally, the adults feel good in this context and seem to work together towards a common aim - that is, their wellbeing. The benefits of participation relate to health, social networks, and learning. The success of this U3A seems to be the result of the dynamics created between the learning, socialisation, and wellbeing of the participants.

Endnote

[1]The paper represents the work of both authors, although Part 1 (Older Adults' Education and Lifelong Learning: A General Overview) was written primarily by Andrea Porcarelli. All other parts of the article were written by Rute Ricardo

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