

## Education, well-being, and meaning in life: the case of a senior university in Portugal\*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Research in the field of adult education has shown the positive impact of formal education on overall well-being. However, research on the impact of non-formal education remains scarce, particularly among older people. Given the phenomenon of an increasingly global ageing population, this ex-post facto correlational study aims to investigate how participation in non-formal education through senior or third age universities has a transformative potential on subjective well-being (SWB), self-esteem, health self-efficacy, and meaning in life for those attending such educational institutions in Portugal. Sixty seniors participated in the study, evenly split between users of a senior university (SU) and seniors who did not attend an SU or similar institution. Data were collected using internationally recognised questionnaires appropriate to the studied variables. The results show substantial effects in the SU attendance group on life satisfaction, negative affect, health self-efficacy, and the search for meaning in life compared to the control group. No significant differences were found for positive affect, as an affective component of SWB, self-esteem, or for the presence of meaning in life, with small effect sizes. The study concludes that senior universities contribute positively, particularly in the cognitive dimension of SWB, to health self-efficacy and to a dimension of meaning in life, supporting their role as contexts for active and healthy ageing and personal development. The need for further research on the topic is highlighted in order to overcome the identified limitations.

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## Keywords

Non-formal education – Subjective well-being – Meaning in life – Health self-efficacy – Senior Universities.

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## Introduction

Contemporary societies, increasingly ageing due to rising life expectancy and falling birth rates, are striving to be active and healthy ageing societies (Cabral; Ferreira, 2014; WHO, 2020). In such a context, the contribution of education, which can ensure quality of life and well-being and facilitate a rethinking of the existential meaning of advanced adulthood, is considered fundamental, especially in what is considered to be the last stage of the life cycle (Flauzino *et al.*, 2022; Oliveira *et al.*, 2015).

The suggestion that education should encompass all ages and dimensions of life is not new, having its roots in Ancient Greece and Rome (Alves, 2010; Thomé, 2022)<sup>4</sup>. However, it gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s with the concept of lifelong education, “frequently associated with popular education, cultural movements [...] social promotion, also strongly linked to community education” (Melo *et al.*, 2021, p. 15), advocated by various international organizations. In particular UNESCO (Dave, 1979), which foresaw its significant role in addressing the challenges of the gerontological revolution that we now face globally. In the early 21st century, this stance has never been more widely disseminated and globally appreciated than in the Manifesto for the 21st Century of the European Association for the Education of Adults’ (EAEA, 2019, p. 18), which states that “active ageing will only be guaranteed if learning in later life is provided for.”

By linking the issues of population ageing with the importance and benefits of education in improving quality of life and well-being, the fields of adult education, also known as Educational Gerontology (Jacob *et al.*, 2023; Oliveira *et al.*, 2015), and Lifelong Education converge. These fields focus in particular on the promotion of long, healthy and autonomous life trajectories with well-being, social participation, and the exercise of citizenship (Sherron; Lumsden, 1978; Lopes; Sousa, 2022; Thomé, 2022). A set of complex dimensions that have attracted the focus of international policy by the United Nations (2002) and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2015, 2020). An area that is proving to be important for knowing how well we are progressing in the right direction. The findings of an extensive Portuguese study by Cabral and Ferreira (2014), which focused on a random sample of elderly people in Portugal, suggest that (despite ongoing discrimination against older, poorer, and less educated people) practices are “converging towards longer lives of higher quality and greater individual and collective empowerment” (p. 134). This is in line with the views of several experts (*e.g.*, Oliveira *et al.*, 2015; Simões, 2006).

Nearly two decades ago, Simões coined the term “the new elderly” highlighting a triple trend in population ageing: people are living longer, healthier, and are more educated. This suggests that the role of older people is becoming increasingly relevant, not only as

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**4-** Cicero (106-43 BC), for example, already acknowledged that memory could be lost in old age, but only when it was not exercised (Cicero, 2005, p. 12).

a larger demographic proportion of the population, but also due to the new qualities that characterise them. Although such a profile cannot be generalised, it is clear that in a short period of time we have moved from an “invisible old age” (Guillemard *apud* Veloso, 2007, p. 264) to an “old age of the helpless and incapacitated”, fostering a prejudiced, negative, and fragile view, or, as Oliveira *et al.* (2015, p. 345) state, “a stereotyped and pessimistic view of old age”, in order to reach “the new old age”, understood as the right to live a phase of life that is full and stimulating as the previous ones, i.e. capable of continuing to be oriented towards development, education, and social participation, despite its peculiarities, which refers to the core idea of recognising a dignity that was previously denied to them. A shift in mentality that is currently highlighting the unavoidable social challenge of educating older adults for successful ageing (Antunes, 2015; Flauzino *et al.*, 2022; Thomé, 2022). The Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education (UNESCO, 2016a, 2022) emphasise the importance of education and present consistent results on the impact of formal education in improving the well-being and quality of life of adult populations, while acknowledging the scarcity of research on the impact of non-formal education. This article seeks to contribute to research this impact by positing education as an onto-anthropological imperative in advanced adulthood.

## **Education as an onto-anthropological imperative in advanced adulthood**

Since the birth of civilisation, the purpose of education has been framed by a variety of considerations, each offering complementary justifications. From an anthropological standpoint, Kant’s famous statement is pivotal: “The human race must gradually draw from itself, through its own efforts, all-natural endowments of humanity” (Kant, 2003, p. 30). Thus, it is concluded that “only through education can man become man. He is nothing but what education makes him” (Kant, 2003, p. 31). In a similar vein, but drawing on scientific contributions from various sources, Harari (2011) demonstrated how the genus “homo” has prevailed through a process in which education has played a central role, while contemporary challenges of robotics, bioengineering, and the computerisation of life have made the ability to reinvent ourselves in each life cycle critical (Harari, 2018). Ontologically, it can be said that every human being must construct their own history, becoming what they make of themselves, as they conceive their existence and drive themselves into it: “man is nothing else but what he makes of himself” (Sartre *apud* Fullat; Mèlich, 1989, p. 74).

If this is an onto-anthropological design, then all genuine education must direct us towards ourselves, “beginning by distancing us from the world in which we are immediately immersed, to then redirect us to that world in a more reflective manner” (Thomson, 2004, p. 457). In this existential journey, Man discovers himself as a being who can never fully overcome certain limitations, nor fully fulfil himself. Thus, they are recurrently destined to a limited realisation, an inconclusiveness that coincides with education itself, embodying “the ontological paradox of never fully becoming what one necessarily seeks: to be educated or to be a human” (Maia, 2006, p. 128). This suggests



that education can only be pursued through a utopian construction in which the ideal speaks to the existential and invites projection, that is, through an unfinished task of assuming the condition and journey of being human (Reis, 2014).

The preceding onto-anthropological analysis provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the intrinsically incomplete state of being human (Freire, 2010; Simões, 1979), where it is essential to respond to the challenges of the ontological project of continually creating and recreating oneself, constructing and reconstructing understandings of the self and the world. According to Gil (2003), education essentially refers to a proposal of humanisation that aspires, through values, to achieve a certain attitude of fullness of the person. The horizon of fullness, which sets the individual on the path to perfection, is structural and consubstantial to education, constituting a telos that is never truly attained. It allows the attainment of different levels of realisation, but is never exhausted in any of them. Thus, education can be seen as an endless process that unites incomplete beings who are utopically motivated to become more (Araújo, J.; Araújo, A., 2006). At this point, when we consider fulfilling the program whose onto-anthropological framework we have sought to outline, the question of means arises.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that in our complex society, encouraging and ensuring participation in education is a powerful determinant of quality of life (Cabral; Ferreira, 2014; Osorio, 2007; UNESCO, 2016a, 2022; Thomé, 2022). This seems to require taking into account formal, non-formal, and informal modalities – an antidote to the so-called “Matthew effect”<sup>5</sup>. It now appears to be generally accepted that intentional participation in educational activities contributes to improving health, autonomy, sense of fulfilment, well-being, and social participation (Páscoa; Gil, 2019; Flauzino *et al.*, 2022), a set of dimensions that make up a life that is not only active but also productive and, above all, meaningful.

Secondly, it is necessary to critically address the tradition that still shapes the harmful ethos and praxis that certain sociocultural quadrants attach to old age. This refers to how ageing has sometimes been viewed through representations trapped by negative stereotypes, which deeply condition attitudes and behaviours and limit the developmental potential of the elderly, both individually and collectively (Depp *et al.*, 2012; OMS, 2015; WHO, 2020; Oliveira; Figueiredo, 2017; Oliveira *et al.*, 2015).

Third, it is essential to reaffirm the basic model of human development across the lifespan (Biggs *et al.*, 2006; Oliveira, 2021). It is central not only to understanding the developmental nature of the life cycle itself, but also that development is present in all its stages, especially in old age, which until recently was understood as destined to an irreversible degeneration of capabilities. Here it is worth highlighting the significant impact of the Seattle Longitudinal Study (Shaie; Willis, 2010), which revolutionised the conceptual understanding of cognitive abilities in older people, and provided empirical support for the idea that it is possible to reverse decline and improve cognitive function in advanced adulthood. In addition, neuroscience research shows that neuroplasticity exists

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**5-** The empirical observation that those who know more, want to know more, and benefit more from the educational opportunities available in their social environment, while those who are less well educated have less motivation and awareness of what they need to know and make less use of the opportunities available (Fernández, 2005).



even in old age and that it is possible to maintain good functional autonomy (e.g., Depp *et al.*, 2012; Fernández-Ballesteros, 2013; Lemair, 2016; Meadle; Park, 2009; Perls, 2010; Spínola; Lincs, 2021).

Fourthly, it is crucial to recognise, as Cabral and Ferreira (2014, p. 108) point out, that “the level of associative belonging and organised participation” is one of the factors that contribute the most to active ageing and, consequently, to quality of life, since the latter is the result of the former (Antunes, 2015; Thomé, 2022). For example, Veloso’s (2015) study, part of the SHARE (Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe) project, concludes that social participation is the factor that contributes most to the health and quality of life of older people. This includes non-formal educational activities, highlighting their crucial importance.

The idea to take away from this discussion is that “old age can be either miserable or pleasant” (Vaillant, 2007, p. 181). It does not have to be limited to decline and loss, as it can also be rooted in the enormous potential of the elderly to develop, learn, enjoy, educate, and actively participate in shaping their lives and the society of which they are part. Non-formal educational institutions, such as senior universities or universities of the third age, seem to be well-suited to these goals, given their greater flexibility when compared to formal institutions.

## **Non-formal education and the senior university movement**

The increasing formal social participation of the elderly in Portuguese society (Cabral; Ferreira, 2014; Veloso, 2015) has led to an expansion of socio-educational activities offered by both public and private organisations. In this context, the Senior Universities (SUs) stand out, targeting an audience aged 50 and over, which is growing in Portugal and worldwide. From 2003 to 2021, the number of these institutions increased by more than 50, with approximately 8,000 enrolments (Pinto, 2003), to 368 SUs, with around 62,000 trainees (Jacob; Meire, 2021; Jacob *et al.*, 2023), considering only those enrolled in the Network of Universities of the Third Age (RUTIS), which represents a significant growth. These institutions have been officially recognised by Resolution No. 76/2016 of the Council of Ministers, which recognises their undeniable role in social participation and “in improving the conditions and quality of life of those who attend them” (Resolution, 2016, p. 4232), and more recently by Order No. 132/2021, which establishes the regulatory norms for the Network of Universities of the Third Age in Portugal, 2021<sup>6</sup>. SUs are institutions that pursue fundamental cultural, educational, and social objectives, with a focus on valuing the elderly (Formosa, 2019). They emerged during a period of significant change in terms of the emergence of services for the elderly

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**6-** The first institution of this kind appeared in Portugal in 1978 and was based on a positive image of the elderly, presenting itself as an institution whose aim was to recognise a valuable and useful role in society and to contribute to “teaching how to live more and better” (International University of the Third Age *apud* Veloso, 2007, p. 274). In Brazil, the first educational programme for older people appeared in 1982, targeting older people with a high level of education and following the French model. Since the 1990s, such programmes have also proliferated in Brazil, with objectives similar to those in Portugal, namely, to promote successful ageing, to counter stereotypes and prejudices associated with old age, to promote autonomy, independence, social participation, and to improve self-esteem (Páscoa; Gil, 2019).



(Veloso, 2007). Until the end of the 20th century, however, their increase was very slow, with significant growth only beginning in 2000 (Veloso, 2017). It is no coincidence that this growth occurred at the same time as Portugal's ageing index passed the critical point of 100 in Portugal (2001), the first time that the number of elderly people (65 and older) exceeded the number of young people under 14 years old.

These institutions fall within the realm of non-formal education, defined by Coombs and Ahmed (1974, p. 8) as "any organised, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups", potentially including various training courses and programmes. These intentional, systematic and organised activities, without formal evaluation, are particularly attractive to SU participants (Pinto, 2003). According to Páscoa and Gil (2019), "the involvement of an elderly person in a senior university enhances their well-being, which is widely associated with health, promoting a sense of happiness and commitment to life" (p. 54).

SUs are governed by principles of great flexibility, offering subjects, courses, workshops, etc., covering the most diverse areas of knowledge (e.g., digital literacy/computing, languages, history, literature, memory stimulation, art workshops, physical activities and health care, recreational and cultural activities, etc.), which emerge in response to the interests and demands of students (Jacob *et al.*, 2023). On closer examination, we find that its operational dynamics reflect fundamental principles of educational gerontology, such as: meeting the specific needs and interests of the individual; establishing personalised and supportive relationships in a welcoming, warm, cooperative, open, and informal environment; creating opportunities for choice; respecting and encouraging the autonomy and self-determination of the individual as well as their co-participation; promoting meaningful and purposeful activities, taking into account the circumstances and idiosyncrasies of each individual and the community; promoting the participation of senior individuals in defining educational, cultural, and recreational pathways and projects that are suitable for them and valued by them (Sherron; Lumsden, 1978; Oliveira; Figueiredo, 2017).

Research on the Universities of the Third Age has supported their positive role in the lives of senior individuals, but understanding of their impact is still poor because information from different research designs needs to be cross-referenced to ensure that conclusions are robust. Learning new things and socialising with others emerge as the main sources of motivation for attending these institutions (Correia, 2020; Rodrigues, 2012), but their activities seem to go beyond the acquisition of new knowledge and the promotion of social interactions. Several qualitative studies conducted previously (e.g., Machado; Medina, 2012; Teixeira; Galinha, 2017) show an increase in well-being ("as if it were psychological therapy"), competence ("I make an effort and the work appears... it's a pleasure"), a different perspective on life ("seeing life positively", "it opened my mind a lot"), on ageing ("it doesn't scare me", "there are really beautiful old ages"), an escape from routines and obligations, a way to restructure the free time ("keeping schedules"), the development of creativity and the process of being (the "gift" of simply "being myself").



Senior individuals recognise that this has a positive impact on their health and mention feeling happier.

By positioning the Universities of the Third Age as structures that promote lifelong education (UNESCO, 2016; Lopes; Sousa, 2022) of a non-formal type, this research aims to better understand their impact by comparing seniors who attend them with other seniors with equivalent characteristics who do not attend any form of organised education. Life satisfaction, well-being, self-efficacy in health care, and perceived meaning in life will be examined among sociodemographic variables.

## Methodology

To address the previously defined problem, we used a correlational, *ex-post-facto* research design, appropriate for studying the effects of a naturally occurring treatment (Tuckman, 2012) in a convenience sample of 60 senior adults (aged 54–85 years) with and without participation in non-formal education activities.

## Participants

The study involved 60 senior participants, coming from a convenience sampling. Thirty of these participants had attended a Senior University of Excellence (Aposenior, Coimbra)<sup>7</sup> for more than one year (criterion group, Group 1), while the remaining 30 had not attended a Senior University or similar institution (comparison group, Group 2). Participants in both groups lived in the city of Coimbra, Portugal. In terms of gender, 20 (30%) identified as male and 40 (70%) as female, evenly distributed between the two groups (ratio 10:20). The age of participant ranged from 54 to 85 years, with a mean of 70.7 years for Group 1 (SD = 7.4) and 71.8 years for Group 2 (SD = 6.2) showing no statistically significant difference ( $t_{(58)} = 0.625$ ,  $p = 0.534$ ). In terms of marital status, 39 indicated “married or in a de facto union”, 11 as “widowed”, 7 as “divorced”, and 3 as “single”, with no significant differences between the groups ( $\chi^2_{(4)} = 1.672$ ,  $p = 0.796$ ). Regarding monthly income, 46 indicated “average”, 10 “low income”, 3 “above average”, and 1 “very low”, again showing no significant differences between groups ( $t_{(58)} = 0.249$ ,  $p = 0.804$ ). In terms of employment/retirement status, 59 participants reported being retired, with only one participant from Group 1 reporting that he/she was employed. In terms of educational attainment, both groups predominantly included seniors with 1st and 2nd cycles of education (14 in Group 1 and 20 in Group 2). For those with 7–12 years of schooling, the numbers were equivalent (7 in Group 1 and 6 in Group 2). For post-secondary and higher education, Group 1 had 9 participants, while Group 2 had 3, with the Mann-Whitney U test showing significant differences in this variable ( $U = 282$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). The sociodemographic characterisation shows that the two groups are equivalent in most variables: gender distribution, age, urban residence, marital status, monthly income,

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<sup>7</sup> - The identification and classification of USs by RUTIS is available at: <https://www.cases.pt/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/lista-de-UTIs-Cases-dez-2019.pdf>



and retirement status, with a significant difference noticed only in the educational level, being higher in Group 1.

## Instruments

Data were collected using internationally recognised scales and questionnaires to assess the dimensions under study, which are briefly identified and characterised below.

*Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)*: Developed by Diener *et al.* (1985), it provides a global indicator of a person's satisfaction with the quality of life. We used the adaptation by Simões (1992), where the global score reflects satisfaction with the way in which one's life has unfolded.

*Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)*: Developed by Watson *et al.* (1988), this scale assesses the affective component of subjective well-being, comprising Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA). The adaptation by Simões (1993) was used.

*Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (ROS)*: this scale is widely used worldwide and assesses global self-esteem, defined as a more positive or negative attitude towards oneself. We used the adaptation by Lima (1991).

*Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)*: this questionnaire, developed by Steger *et al.* (2006), assesses the dimensions of presence and search for meaning in life. The "presence of meaning" subscale assesses the perception of meaning or purpose in life, while the "search for meaning" subscale indicates the extent to which an individual perceives themselves as seeking meaning. The adaptation by Simões *et al.* (2010) was used.

*Self-Efficacy for Self-Direction in Health Scale (EAAS)*: developed and validated by Oliveira *et al.* (2016), this scale measures the extent to which seniors feel able to effectively manage their health. It includes four dimensions: physical activity, healthy eating, learning about health, and visiting health professionals.

## Procedures

Data for Group 1 were collected in the Aposenior classrooms after obtaining permission from the university's administration, professors, and the seniors themselves. Data for Group 2 were collected through the League of Friends of the Norton de Matos Health Centre. Nurses visit this Centre two to three times a week to provide health care (measuring blood pressure, diabetes, and other health indicators), as community support for the elderly residents in the area. In accordance with ethical research procedures, all participants were informed of the study's objectives, methodology, data collection, analysis process, and anonymisation; they gave their written informed consent, referring to the ethical principles for scientific research involving human subjects.

## Results

The main results of this study in relation to well-being, self-esteem, meaning in life, and self-efficacy in health care, are presented below (Table 1). For all analyses, a significance level of 0.05 was used for hypothesis testing.

**Table 1** - Descriptive statistics of the study variables and independent samples t-test

Measures	Group 1 (attending US)			Group 2 (not attending US)			t Test		P. (d)
	Mean (SD)	Min.	Max.	Mean (SD)	Min.	Max.	t	df.	
Satisfaction with life	25.37 (5.29)	14	35	22.00 (7.12)	9	33	2.078	53.51	0.042 (0.55)
Positive affect	33.53 (4.86)	22	43	32.13 (7.00)	18	46	0.900	51.65	0.372 (0.24)
Negative affect	19.53 (5.75)	10	31	22.33 (6.49)	10	40	- 1.769	58	0.082 (0.46)
Self-esteem	24.67 (2.89)	21	34	23.83 (3.16)	20	32	1.065	58	0.291 (0.28)
Presence of meaning in life	17.50 (3.09)	9	24	17.90 (3.14)	13	24	- 0.495	58	0.621 (0.13)
Search for meaning in life	14.60 (5.24)	5	24	18.37 (3.51)	9	23	- 3.270	50.63	0.002 (0.86)
Self-efficacy in health	158.90 (19.51)	124	191	146.53 (27.16)	69	185	2.025	58	0.047 (0.53)

Caption; SD - Standard Deviation; Min – minimum value; Max – maximum value; t – Student's t-test statistic; df – degrees of freedom; p – probability; d – effect size (Cohen's d).

Source: Authors' own work.

As shown in Table 1, elderly individuals who attend a senior university differ from those who do not attend such institutions in several aspects: they have better life satisfaction ( $p = 0.042$ , with an effect size, measured by Cohen's d, of  $d = 0.55$ , indicating a medium effect), better self-efficacy in health care ( $p = 0.047$ , with an effect size, measured by Cohen's d, of  $d = 0.53$ , indicating a medium effect), and a lower search for meaning in life ( $p = 0.002$ , with an effect size, measured by Cohen's d, of  $d = 0.86$ , indicating a large effect). There is also a lower trend for negative affect ( $p = 0.082$ , with an effect size, measured by Cohen's d, of  $d = 0.46$ , indicating a near-medium effect). Senior individuals in group 1 do not differ from those in group 2 (without involvement in educational activities such as those offered by the Universities of the Third Age) in terms of positive affect ( $p = 0.372$ , with an effect size, measured by Cohen's d, of  $d = 0.24$ , indicating a small effect), self-esteem ( $p = 0.291$ , with an effect size, measured by Cohen's d, of  $d = 0.28$ , indicating a small effect), or the presence of meaning in life ( $p = 0.621$ , with an effect size, measured by Cohen's d, of  $d = 0.13$ , indicating a very small effect).



## Discussion of results

The primary objective of this research was to understand how attending senior universities, as an option for lifelong education in a non-formal setting, can have a positive impact on the quality of life and well-being of older adults compared to others with similar sociodemographic conditions but without attending a similar institution.

Indeed, as shown, the results tend to support our initial hypotheses. In particular, in the area of subjective well-being (SWB), which includes cognitive judgments about life satisfaction and emotional reactions to life events (Diener *et al.*, 2003; Kushlev *et al.*, 2020), the group of seniors who attended a non-formal education institution showed greater life satisfaction and lower negative affect. No significant differences were found in the positive affect of SWB between the two groups. As emotions have a significant impact on an individuals' health<sup>8</sup> and reflect a global protective mechanism, research suggests stability in positive affect in late adulthood, or even a slight improvement (*e.g.* Diener; Chan, 2011; Fernández-Ballesteros, 2013; Buecker *et al.*, 2020; Oliveira *et al.*, 2024), highlighting its supportive role, for example, in coping with adverse situations such as loss. These findings help to explain the lack of differences in positive affect between the two study groups. It is noteworthy that the occurrence of subjective well-being requires high levels of positive affect and, conversely, lower levels of negative affect (Diener, 2009; Simões *et al.*, 2000; Oliveira *et al.*, 2024). This is exactly the pattern we found in the groups under study, with the particularity that negative affect is lower in seniors from Group 1, suggesting a positive influence of attending senior universities on reducing negative emotions. Several studies support this line of reasoning by showing less symptoms of depression and anxiety (*e.g.* Jacob *et al.*, 2019; Queirós, 2015). For example, the study by Queirós (2015) shows that older adults who attend senior universities are three times less likely to suffer from depression than those who do not attend. In addition, this study reports that women are five times more likely to suffer from depressive symptoms, while unmarried or individuals who live alone are four times more likely. Given that marital status and gender were controlled for in our sample, this further supports the thesis that senior universities promote subjective well-being by increasing life satisfaction and reducing negative emotions, rather than enhancing positive emotions.

In terms of self-esteem, contrary to expectations (*e.g.*, Baptista, 2018; Oliveira *et al.*, 2015), we found no differences between the two studied groups. This lack of differences can be explained by the fact that self-esteem is a global, trait-like indicator that is harder to change, because it is related to core dimensions of one's identity. Self-efficacy, which is related to self-esteem as discussed below, is more susceptible to change as a result of educational interventions, as it is fundamentally explained by personal success in performing specific tasks or "personal empowerment", as mentioned by Thomé (2022, p. 170) in the context of senior universities.

If, as our initial proposition suggested, from an onto-anthropological perspective, meaning in life is understood as an indicator of personal development and a critical life

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**8-** For example, they directly affect the chemical and neuronal responses involved in the dynamics of homeostasis (Damasio, 2003) and indirectly affect the intellectual (*e.g.*, memory), physical (*e.g.*, strength), psychological (*e.g.*, resilience), and social (*e.g.*, support network) resources.

dimension (Barros-Oliveira, 2006; Ryan; Deci, 2020), and if education in senior universities serves the onto-anthropological project, it would be expected that there would be a greater presence of meaning in life and consequently less search for it, among the group attending a senior university compared to the other group. In reality, the first prediction did not hold, as both groups had similar perceptions of the presence of meaning in life. Since meaning in life is systematically associated with greater subjective well-being, and since this study did not find greater positive affect in the group attending senior universities, we understand that this helps to interpret the lack of differences regarding meaning in life. Apparently, activities in senior universities do not influence the presence of meaning in life but do have a significant impact on the search for meaning dimension, as seniors attending a senior university do not perceive themselves as actively searching for meaning in life. Given Steger *et al.*'s (2006) assertion that the search for meaning is linked to a deep desire to “understand, integrate, and synthesise experience” (p. 204), the activities of senior universities seem to respond to this desire by facilitating processes of understanding and integrating experience. Indeed, some qualitative research reports support this understanding: “it was a new meaning I wanted to give to my life”; “new meanings, joys, and the feeling of being ‘alive’”; “even the view of one’s own life becomes different” (Machado; Medina, 2012); “it opened my mind a lot” (Teixeira; Galinha, 2017). Such testimonies suggest the activation of processes that change perspectives on life, indicating changes in the structures of attributing meaning, with dynamics linked to emancipatory processes and personal development.

Self-efficacy in self-care, or the confidence people have in their ability to succeed in this area, is another positive effect that senior universities seem to have on participants. Self-efficacy beliefs are powerful determinants of human behaviour and are considered essential components of feelings of competence, control, and well-being (Bandura, 1997; Ryan; Deci, 2020), as they influence the types of activities people choose, the effort they expend and the emotions they experience. High scores in this dimension are associated with maintaining good autonomy, self-determination and decision-making about one’s life, which are fundamental elements of active and healthy ageing (OMS, 2015; WHO, 2020). Indeed, we can refer to a review of studies from different countries and cultures by Fernández-Ballesteros *et al.* (2010), who point out that successful ageing is associated with good health maintenance, self-care competence, a strong social support network, and feeling good about oneself. As the results of this study also show, active and deliberate participation in educational activities in old age seems to respond well to these aspirations.

However, there are limitations to the findings. The research design does not allow for causal inference, and the results cannot be generalised to the population of older adults attending or not attending senior universities, as a convenience sample was used. The sample is also small and consists of seniors living in Coimbra, Portugal. We do not have data to confirm that the educational dynamics of the senior university studied are identical to those of other senior universities, although several in Portugal are also rated as excellent. It should also be noted that the two studied groups were not completely equivalent, as the seniors attending a senior university had a higher level of education, although all other parameters compared were identical. These limitations highlight



the need for further research in other senior universities and regions, with larger and more controlled samples, and using mixed and longitudinal designs that can help better understand the educational processes generated and the changes associated with them. This will lead to a better understanding of the role of senior universities in the lives of older adults, in reconfiguring their projects, aspirations, well-being, and meaning in life.

## Final considerations

The results obtained from a comparison of two groups, where the main difference was participation or non-participation in non-formal education activities at a senior university, generally support the postulated hypothesis that education provided to older adults contributes substantially to their well-being. This is particularly true in terms of increased life satisfaction and reduced negative affect, as well as reduced search for meaning in life and improved self-efficacy in self-care. From the perspective of considering late adulthood as a stage of multiple possibilities, the results of this study demonstrate that significant outcomes can be achieved through the opportunities offered by non-formal education, the encouragement of active lifestyles and the support of viewing old age as a time equally open to change and development (Cicero, 2005; Oliveira *et al.*, 2015; Páscoa; Gil, 2019). This fosters a perception that contrasts starkly with the negative view often associated with old age: as Cicero noted, “everyone strives to reach old age, yet once it is attained, everyone complains about it” (2005, p. 6). However, empirical research shows that “those who attend senior universities perceive ageing more positively and optimistically; they are aware of their ‘frailties’ (mostly physical), but also of their potential” (Machado; Medina, 2012, p. 165). Indeed, at a time when considerable advances have been made in understanding ageing processes, it is now appropriate to adopt a vision that focuses on the potential of older adults and reaffirms the crucial importance of educational responses, particularly non-formal ones, in enhancing the well-being, health, and meaning in life of senior citizens.

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