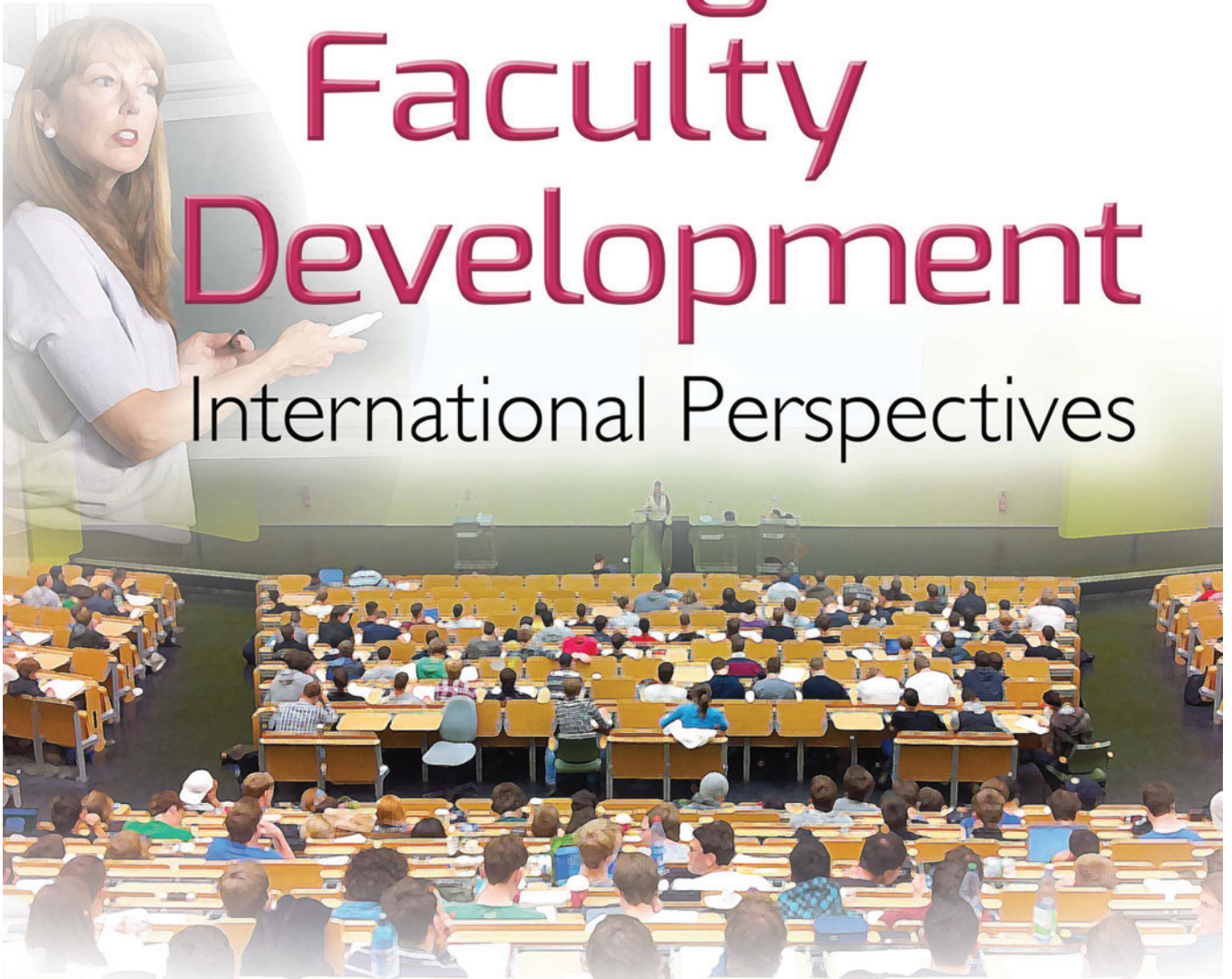Olga M. Alegre de la Rosa

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INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

OLGA M. ALEGRE DE LA ROSA
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CONTENTS

Chapter 17

INCLUSIVE UNIVERSITY FOR ALL PEOPLE AND AGES: HIGHER EDUCATION AND OLDER PERSONS

Susana Agudo Prado[1,2,*]*, Ph.D.,*
Alejandro Rodríguez-Martín[1,2]*, Ph.D.,*
Emilio Álvarez-Arregui[1,2]*, Ph.D.,*
M. Dolores Díaz Noguera[1,2]*, Ph.D. and*
Pedro Román Graván[1,2]*, Ph.D.*

[1]Department of Education Sciences,
University of Oviedo, Oviedo, Spain
[2]Department of Didactics and School Organization,
University of Seville, Seville, Spain

ABSTRACT

After the international recognition of older persons (1999 was declared the *international year of older persons*, under the motto: *"a society for all ages"*), the concern of current society about them, as an emerging social strength, has been reflected in the development of numerous initiatives.

Nowadays, the services and programs offered should no longer be related only to protection and assistance, since it has been demonstrated that most older persons are still in an optimal stage of development, which comes with risks and losses, but also with rewards and opportunities. As a consequence of this situation, new initiatives and programs are being designed (e.g., senior universities) with the aim of providing the maximum number of opportunities of educational, social and cultural development for older persons.

These initiatives favor the mental and physical health of the elderly while they increase their cultural baggage, which helps them to further develop their personality and show their creativity.

All of the above mentioned justifies the purpose of the present study, which is focused on knowing the willingness of older persons to keep learning at that stage of life,

* E-mail: agudosusana@uniovi.es.

the information they have about university educational programs designed for the elderly and their initiative to participate in some higher education program for senior citizens.

Keywords: inclusive, university, older persons, higher education

INTRODUCTION

It is a demonstrated fact that the number of older persons is increasing every day among the European population, due to the considerable increase in life expectancy in the last few years and the progressive decrease of birth rates. The proportion of people over 65 years of age is increasing faster than any other age group, and Spain is one of the most aged countries of Europe (with 18% of older persons in the total population). Thereby, the largest generations are the oldest and not the youngest.

This prolonged and silent phenomenon has been called "Demographic Revolution", "Demographic Earthquake" and "New International Order of the Population", and, due to its consequences, it poses a social transformation that brings important challenges.

From an educational perspective, old age is another stage in the development of life; therefore, it is susceptible of socialization, just like any other life phase.

Socialization may be considered, according to Vega (1996), as a process of social learning by which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, needs, motivations and the cognitive and affective patterns that allow them to participate as a member of a team or society in a more or less effective manner. Obviously, this is a type of participatory socialization versus the opposite, repressive socialization, in which the autonomy of the individuals is more important than their obedience, favoring the freedom to initiate activities and explore the world on their own initiative.

In fact, since we live in a constantly changing reality, older persons must be trained to adapt to it. Education is regarded as the key to understand the nature of change, recognize how it can be directed and control its effects. Fernández Lópiz (2002:8) states that access to education and culture is essential for older persons to reengage with their identity and also to be able to bring their capacities and needs to a real case scenario. Depending on attitude (positive or negative) education may be perceived as a challenge or a problem, but it is always and advance, a step towards the future.

Therefore, it is necessary to foster educational initiatives directed to older persons. And this can be seen already within the European context, where there is an important emergence of cultural and educational projects, exclusively for older persons.

In most international forums, education has been embraced as a fundamental resource for older persons, with the aim of favoring personal change, adaptation to new phases of life and social change.

This new perspective has been considered since the Conference on Aging at the White House in 1971 up to the present day. After the international recognition of older persons in 1999 (*International Year of Older Persons, under the motto "A Society for All Ages"*), numerous initiatives started to emerge, which reflected the concern for this age group in current society, as a new emerging social strength.

As stated by Cambero (2005:110), according to the demographic surveys towards the next years to come in the 21st century, there could be a more informed and trained older

population with greater knowledge, access to more economic resources, a different view on how to spend their leisure time, other demands and needs regarding quality of life…, etc.; to sum up, an older person who may want to participate more actively in his/her surrounding reality, communities and groups of fellows that share similar interests and perspectives of the future. Some older persons are already changing their profile; they have other needs and expectations. Triadó and Villar (2008:145) observed that

> [...] the profile of a typical participant is a relatively young person –approximately two out of three participants are over 65 years of age–, with a high level of education with respect to the standards of the entire older population –two thirds of the participants have obtained secondary education or higher, and approximately 30% have previous university studies– and mostly female (70% women).

Nowadays, the services and programs offered should no longer be related only to protection and assistance, since it has been demonstrated that most older persons are still in an optimal stage of development, which comes with risks and losses, but also with rewards and opportunities. As a consequence of this situation, new initiatives and programs emerge (senior universities) with the aim of providing the maximum number of opportunities of educational, social and cultural development for older persons. Higher education confidently opens its doors to the older population. Universities not only respond to the academic and professional demand; they also have a social responsibility. It can be asserted that practically all the Spanish universities have an educational program for older persons as a response to the social demands and needs.

According to the data from the *Asociación Estatal de Programas Universitarios para Mayores* (AEPUM) in Spain ("National Association of University Programs for Older Persons), which covers the entire Spanish territory, including a total of 44 universities, public and private, during the academic year 2015-16, the number of students that undertook the university programs for people over 50 years of age increased up to 48,234.

These initiatives favor older persons to enjoy a better mental and physical health while they enhance their cultural baggage, which will allow them to keep developing their personality and show their creativity. With these data, it is demonstrated that there is no age limit for the will of human improvement and development.

Times change, and the university must respond to new situations and new social challenges. Senior universities constitute one of the healthiest initiatives that foster an active aging and, in turn, their lecture rooms gather a creditable human potential that society cannot afford to ignore. Their continuous ambition to be up to date, to acquire the knowledge that allows them to understand the current world and to get closer to the emerging technologies are characteristics that define them: will and intentionality, as well as commitment.

Many older people did not have the cultural and educational opportunities that younger generations have nowadays. Providing these opportunities to them will help them adapt to the new social situations they must face; for instance, the massive incorporation of emerging technologies.

Education is a new dimension to be valued; the United Nations asserted that, regarding aging, education is fundamental.
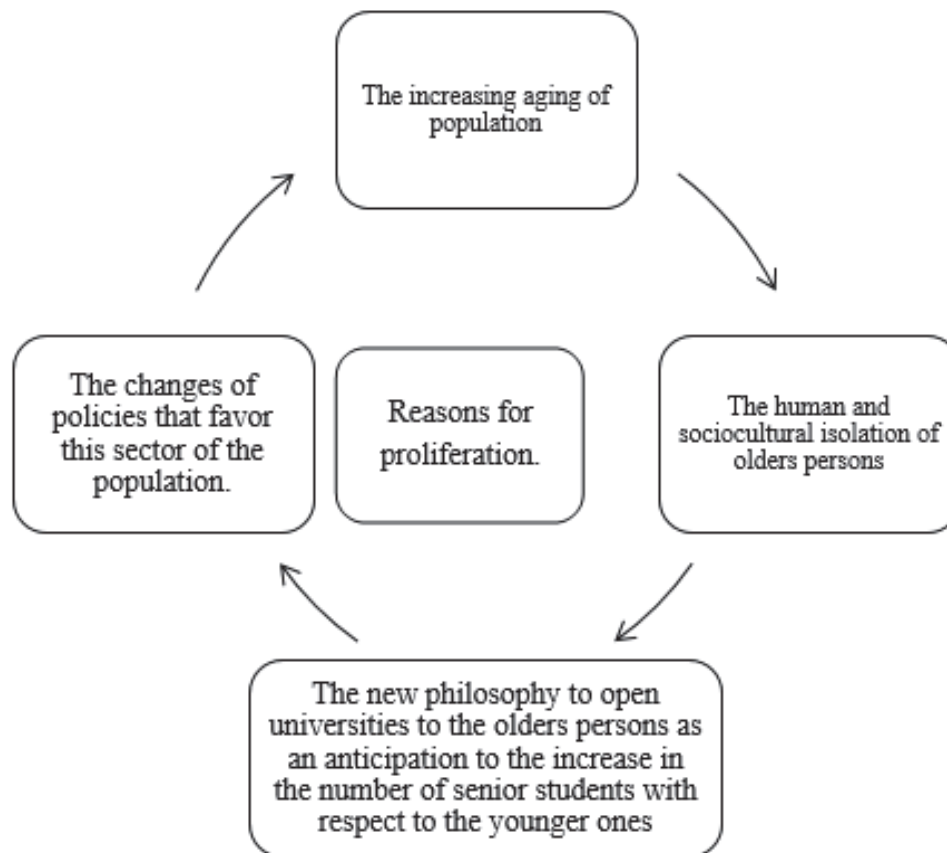
Source: Velázquez and Fernández (1998). Own elaboration.

Figure 1. Reasons for the proliferation of Senior Universities.

Recommendation 32 states that educational programs must be established, in which older persons are teachers who pass on knowledge, culture and values, thus allowing the potential of older generations to be beneficial to everyone.

The *next recommendation* stresses on the right of these people to keep developing their education permanently through specific programs that are suitable for their characteristics. The social and educational policy insists on the importance of facing this phase with the perspective of undertaking new learnings, filling this period of life with excitement, and preventing the entire population from seeing it as an end point.

Schneider (2003) claims that some studies performed in Germany have shown that people with higher levels of education are less susceptible to depression, face life events better and, in general, show higher levels of health than those with lower levels of education. It is therefore observed that the level of formal education is positively related to life expectancy, even at a greater extent than it could be related to social status or economic income. To sum up, it is claimed that education is a key factor in an active and successful aging, and universities, with their opening to society, are a fundamental pillar for the design of inclusive universities for everyone. Education increases the possibilities of leisure and improves the ability to learn, communicate, think…, i.e., the possibilities of life satisfaction. Not only that, but it also presents as a determining factor linked to a longer and more autonomous life.

Thereby, it is justified that higher education opens its doors to older persons, who will foreseeably be an increasing number of users every year (in the academic year 2005-2006 they were around 23,000; ten years later, in the academic year 2015-2016 they were more than 48,000). There has never been a large tradition between universities and older persons (the implementation of these programs began in the 70s-80s), since university education has always been linked to other stages of life (youth), although in the present day it is known that the innate human capacity to adapt and learn does not depend on age and that the benefits of higher education in the older population favor an increase in the capacity to solve daily life problems.

Nowadays, and since the creation of the first senior university in Toulouse (France, 1973) by Pierre Vellas, and the ambition to install the European scheme "Universities of the Third Age" (U3A) in Spain in 1978, the demand is increasing; there are universities for older persons in all the European countries, and also in different parts of the world: Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, U.S.A., etc. The goal is to foster that lifelong learning must be for everyone, excluding nobody for matters of age, sex, ethnicity, etc. In a proactive manner, the ideal conditions must be created for this to take place, in order to develop creativity, favor autonomy and foster self-confidence and enjoyment; all this supported by the idea that it is a personal investment with important social benefits, which is also related to the prosperity of a country. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in *Lifelong Learning for All*, provides statistical data of the social benefits that learning throughout life poses for countries, organizations and people.

Senior universities can be considered as a service that provides access to cultural assets, improves the quality of life and fosters the creative use of leisure. Velázquez and Fernández (1998:19) defined senior universities as a scientific, cultural and social movement that aims to bring back to older persons their dignity and the active place they deserve in the core of society, while also enhancing generational and intergenerational relationships. These universities can be considered as a project of cultural development oriented to favor individual and group development and to foster continuous education and social participation to improve the quality of life.

This initiative poses a new concept of university education that teaches to age in a healthy and supportive manner, expanding to all social groups while also strengthening intergenerational relationships. To sum up, it is about a process of adaptation to the social and cultural needs of older persons that requires the support of institutions, both social and educational. Lorenzo (2003:132-133) detailed the social and educational goals that the university programs for older persons must achieve:

Social goals

- Improve the quality of life of older persons through the knowledge and relationships established within the university environment.
- Promote the development of interpersonal and intergenerational relationships, favoring the exchange and transfer of wisdom, experiences and values.
- Foster associationism through university activity, both inside and outside the university.
- Enable the creation of volunteer work groups of older persons in collaboration with social services and communities, as well as other institutions.

- In collaboration with social and educational services, develop programs of social projection and participation, through which the transfer of wisdom, experiences and values is guaranteed between generations.

Educational goals

- Favor the personal development of older persons from the perspective of lifelong education.
- Provide the first opportunity to those who could not undertake university courses in other stages of their life.
- Provide university training that enables the development of autonomous learning.
- Promote a better understanding of their own environment with the aim of making a better use of the educational, cultural and leisure offers of society.
- Grant access to other university studies for those people that have the required training to undertake them after passing the specific courses for older persons.

In this sense, the aim of the present study is to know the willingness of older persons to keep learning in this stage of life, as well as the information that they receive from the university programs addressed to them and their initiative to participate in some of these programs registered in higher education.

METHODS

Participants

The participants of this study were 250 older persons without distinction or significant differences with respect to gender. The profile of the older person surveyed that constitutes the sample is over 65 years of age and married, lives with his wife or her husband in an urban area, and has a primary level of education. The data indicate that the sample, according to its personal and socio-demographic characteristics, is relatively homogenous, which is demonstrated by the standard deviations of the following variables: place of residence (ST = .530), way of coexistence (ST = .372), marital status (ST = .834) and gender (ST = .496).

Instruments

The design of this study is descriptive through a quantitative-qualitative methodology. The aims proposed in the investigation and the way to carry it out (methodology) lead us to choose diversity and paradigmatic complementarity, due to the changing and dynamic nature of the phenomenon to study.

Considering that there is a methodological complementarity, two instruments were used in this research for the collection of information: the *survey* and *discussion groups*. The *survey* gathers data related to age, sex, marital status and education level (personal and contextual data); it also obtains information about topics involving older persons and higher

education. The *discussion groups* complement, contrast and enrich the data extracted, with the knowledge and opinion of older persons about their interests or motivations to participate in the university programs.

With regard to internal consistency, the reliability was calculated through Cronbach´s Alpha, which was 0.755.

Procedure

The results presented were obtained from both the survey and the discussion groups. The survey was structured into four blocks of questions, which following a sequence that went from more general to more specific, and were grouped by topic. Closed questions were basically used (those of alternative dichotomous and multiple-choice answers), as they are easy to answer and require less effort and time. This way, older persons do not need to write, but choose one of the answers proposed.

Then, five discussion groups were established, constituted by a total of 40 older persons, distributed in groups of 5 or 10 people. The participants were selected from those who participated in the survey (in a voluntary manner, by offering them the chance to meet again some other time to give them the opportunity to present their ideas and comments about the research topic). The additional value offered by the act of listening is expected to stimulate and give confidence to older persons, as a new emerging social strength. The results of the present study represent the fundamental element to define specific criteria, in order to address and design formative plans in higher education aimed at older persons.

Results

The results obtained demonstrate that older persons constitute an active social group, eager to learn and face new educational challenges.

It is interesting to state that older persons feel good while learning. 98.1%, with no significant differences between genders [$X2$ (1) = 1.689, p >.05] consider it a rewarding activity. In addition, there are no significant correlations with other personal or socio-demographic variables, such as age [$X2$ (4) = 2.251, p >.05], marital status [$X2$ (3) = 2.766, p >.05], education level [$X2$ (6) = 1.580, p >.05], way of coexistence [$X2$ (1) = .265, p >.05] and place of residence [$X2$ (2) = .0829, p >.05].

However, it is significant and interesting to highlight the *Chi-square results* [$X2$ (1) = 6.428, p >.05] with regard to the correlation established between the way of initiating a formative activity for the first time: on one´s own initiative and/or motivated by a member of the family.

As the education level increases, older persons have greater willingness to continue their studies, and they point out that "*you never stop learning*". The numbers are very clear about this fact; 92% of older persons with university studies aim to study in this stage of life. The mere act of learning is appealing (80%). In addition to having a stimulating and motivating function, learning involves engaging, socializing and coexisting.

It seems relevant to explain this. As a person´s level of education increases, he/she has a greater willingness to initiate or retake an educational activity related to the university.

According to the data obtained, it is obvious that older persons without studies (although they can read and write), or with elementary education level, show lower predisposition to start studying at the university, whereas older persons with secondary education level (23%) have thought about it. Once again, education is promoted as a strategy in the struggle against mental and social barriers, which favors equality of opportunities and equity.

This matter is tackled in more depth with the following question: "*Do you consider that one of the key elements to get on well in current society is lifelong learning?*" 89.3% answer in a positive way, versus 8.4%, who did not know / did not answer, and 2.3%, who said that it is not a key element to get on well in current society.

In a more detailed analysis, after carrying out the X2 test, no significant correlation was found neither for the variable "gender" [X2 (2) = 1.235, p >.05], nor for age, marital status, education level or place of residence. However, there is evidence with regard to the way of coexistence, concluding that there is a correlation between the this and the opinion of the population about learning as one of the key elements in current society. Most of the people who live alone believe that lifelong learning is one of the keys to get on well in the modern world.
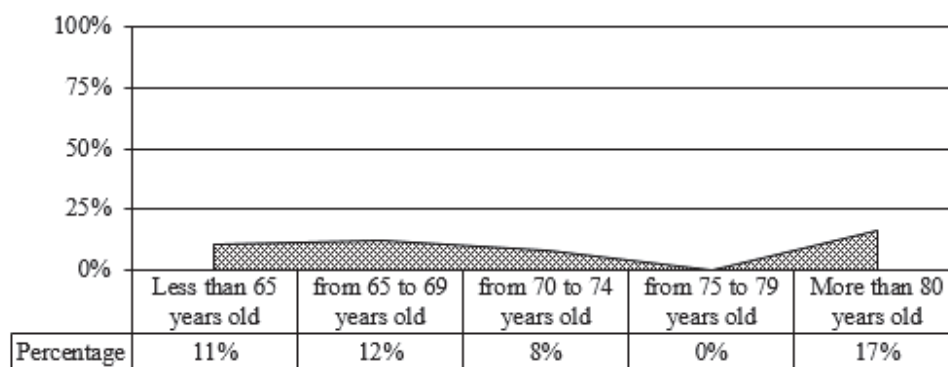
When tackling the question about whether they have thought about undertaking university courses, it is surprising that only 10% replied in a positive manner.

Mainly, they point out that this is due to a lack of information about the university programs aimed at older persons. 75% of them do not know that universities offer this kind of courses.

Neither marital status [X2 (3) = 5.872, p >.05], way of coexistence [X2 (1) = 1.080, p >.05] nor place of residence [X2 (2) = 1.527, p >.05] are determining variables for thinking about the challenge of undertaking university studies.

If thought carefully, the results obtained could be related to the poor information that older persons have about the university programs designed for them; 77.4% of them do not know about these programs (versus 22.6%, who claim to know about them).

With regard to gender, both men and women know the university programs aimed at older persons with similar percentages (20.1% and 26.4%, respectively), with no significant differences regarding this variable. Furthermore, this information confirms the Chi-square test [X2 (1) = 1.121, p >.05] and the *Lambda Goodman Coefficient* = .000, which show that there is no correlation between gender and knowing about the program.

	Less than 65 years old	from 65 to 69 years old	from 70 to 74 years old	from 75 to 79 years old	More than 80 years old
Percentage	11%	12%	8%	0%	17%

Source: own elaboration from the survey data.

Graph 2. Older persons, by age group, who have thought about undertaking university studies.

CONCLUSION

As can be demonstrated, studying nowadays is not an exclusive process restricted to a specific stage of life, but it has become a permanent activity. The idea underlying permanent education is to accept the learning capacity that people have at every stage of the life cycle, although with special features, since older persons are not children and they do not learn in the same way or have the same interests as them.

Moreover, older persons do not seek approval, but gratification, respect and self-esteem.

University programs for older persons develop a very important role of multidisciplinary formation of older citizens. Around fields such as Preventive Medicine, Science and Technology, leisure and cultural trips, etc., older persons are brought closer to interesting and current issues, thus fostering social and community participation.

This study demonstrates that older persons are interested in learning, that they are eager to and in need for learning, and that they see that this is the suitable stage of life to do so. Opening universities to older persons redefines the concept of university, and it wagers for a higher education that adapts to all people, regardless of their age, understanding that education is a lifelong process and that the university is one of the educational institutions that society can rely on for this principle to become a reality.

Permanent learning favors older persons to feel well, and they consider it a rewarding activity, besides being one of the key elements to get on well in current society, as indicated by most people living alone.

Although the satisfaction to keep learning is a generalized reality, only 10% have thought about undertaking university courses. This fact is undoubtedly related to the education level (older people with secondary education level and university studies are mostly the ones who think about taking this challenge in the short term). It seems relevant to explain this, by indicating that the higher the level of education of a person the higher his/her predisposition to initiate or retake an educational activity related to the university; and it is them (the older persons with higher levels of education) who have more information about the university program for older persons (secondary education level: 28%, and university studies: 31.5%).

Thereby, this kind of information could be very useful in the design of future actions for all the organizations that work with older persons (as well as for universities). A joint work of collaboration and support would allow older persons that are interested in taking or retaking university studies to obtain information at designated spaces that are near their environment and opened to the community, as promoters of the motto "*learning has no age*".

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