The Educator in the Portuguese Senior University

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ABSTRACT – The Educator in the Portuguese Senior University. Educators are considered to be key players in the development of educational proposals of Senior Universities in Portugal. In the theoretical perspective of educational gerontology, this exploratory and qualitative research has identified the characteristics recommended for educators, based on the perspectives of older learners and educators, as well as those of technicians (researchers and experts) in the field of education for the older adults. Messages from 265 participants were submitted to content analysis and the results have shown that affective, primarily, and technical aspects of third-age education are seen as important, and thus recommended for those who teach seniors. The adoption of a technical-affective model for the teaching-learning practice regarding seniors is suggested.
Keywords: **Senior University. Educators. Older Adults. Teaching-Learning.**

RESUMO – O Educador na Universidade Sénior em Portugal. Os educadores são considerados os elementos-chave no desenvolvimento de propostas educativas das Universidades Sénior em Portugal. Considerando a abordagem teórica da gerontologia educacional, a pesquisa exploratória e qualitativa identificou as principais características recomendadas para os educadores, segundo a perspectiva dos seniores, educadores e técnicos (pesquisadores e especialistas) no campo da educação de idosos. As mensagens de 265 participantes foram submetidas à análise de conteúdo e os resultados apresentaram que aspectos técnicos e, principalmente, afetivos são considerados importantes e aconselháveis para os que ensinam a seniores. Sugere-se a adoção de um modelo técnico-afetivo na condução do ensino-aprendizagem para seniores.
Palavras-chave: **Universidade Sênior. Educadores. Idosos. Ensino-Aprendizagem.**

Introduction

The educational processes for older learners have been a recurring theme in academic research (Hachem, 2020; Flauzino et al., 2022). Understanding educational actions for and about seniors and the ageing process is the central topic of investigation in the multidisciplinary field of educational gerontology, which is reasoned on the comprehension of seniors as lifelong learners (Hachem, 2020). Geragogy refers to the education of, and for, seniors, although it has not been the only term to examine the teaching and learning of older people. (Findsen; Formosa, 2011). There is a variety of similar terminologies to refer to the education of seniors, such as, for example, gerontagogy, gerogogy, critical geragogy and permanent education, which have a nature (field/program, science/discipline or theoretical reflection), disciplinary anchorage (multidisciplinary gerontology or education science) and distinct argumentative approaches.

As Kern (2018) reports, gerontagogy appears anchored in the discipline of education and supports the argument that educational practices can help the elderly to deal with the changes resulting from the ageing process. The gerogogy terminology presents the teaching and learning process as a collective enterprise anchored in the field of gerontology. The terminology critical geragogy, on the other hand, expresses an argumentative approach with emancipatory intentions based on the discipline of education. Following, in turn, the terminology of permanent education bases its educational practices according to the needs and objectives of the student.

Therefore, issues related to objectives, typology and the very designation of the terms do not express any consensus in the literature (Gil, 2015). What is more, the role of the educator is presented in distinct terms depending on the philosophical perspective adopted in the field of educational gerontology. Hachem (2020) stresses that in the humanistic view, older adult education aims at self-fulfilment and personal growth, where the educator is a facilitator throughout the learning process; on the other hand, in the critical view, the objective is social change aligned with concepts of empowerment and emancipation, where the educator assumes their role as directing the learning process.

Findsen and Formosa (2011) draw attention to the fact that learning experiences will become more efficient for the older adult once educators gain a greater awareness of, and demonstrate higher sensitivity towards, gerontologic issues – "[…] which, of course, will be highly diverse considering the widespread heterogeneous character of later life" (Findsen; Formosa, 2011, p. 105). Therefore, considering the learners' singularities, the application of pedagogic methods may require some personalisation in the teaching process, since education for the older person does not equate to an extension of andragogy[1] (adult education) – the latter differing from the former in many aspects, especially with respect to educational needs and motivations (Brink, 2017).

Jarvis (2004) highlights that from a traditional viewpoint, teaching involves a set of skills and knowledge of the cultural environment which are transmitted on by educators by means of a skilful technique. However, such an approach presents itself as inadequate in a context of teaching older learners, since their previous educational experiences must be also recognised. In this sense, it is the educators' responsibility to identify their learners' learning needs as well as to evaluate and determine their level of previous knowledge which, in turn, involves human interaction; that is, humanistic teaching which may enable "[…] human beings to achieve their own potential, without imposing on them predetermined outcomes, although we recognize the importance of what is learned in the process" (Jarvis, 2004, p. 195). This means that the way of teaching is as important as the methods used in educational activities for seniors, who must be encouraged and motivated to create knowledge. The learning experiences of seniors can happen in different places such as associations, community centres, libraries, museums, art galleries, educational centres, and, in most cases, universities (Flauzino et al. 2022). In this context, specifically, the Universities of the Third Age (U3A) are notable as a global movement of non-formal education for adults and older people (Formosa, 2021). Since the 1970s, U3A programs have adapted to the sociocultural peculiarities of each country, originating two main U3A models: the French model, in which the educational activities are linked to formal third-level institutions, and the English model offered by non-profit organisations or groups grounded in principles of self-help and voluntarism (Vellas, 2019).

In Portugal, the first International U3A was founded in 1979 in Lisbon (Teixeira, 2017). Since then, various institutions have emerged across the country with different titles – e.g. Seniors Universities, Universities of Maturity and Academies of Culture and Cooperation – the majority not being connected with any formal educational institutions (Páscoa; Gil, 2019). This means that the Portuguese Senior Universities (*Universidades Seniores*; henceforth SU in the English acronym) are more similar to the British model, since they are established by non-governmental, third-sector organisations.

According to the Portuguese Network of Universities of the Third Age (RUTIS), 249 Academies and Senior Universities offered services for more than 35,000 Portuguese members over 50 years of age in 2015, with more than 4,300 subjects offered mainly by volunteer educators (92%) (RUTIS, 2016). Recent data reveals a total of 368 SUs registered with RUTIS comprising approximately 61,000 members enrolled and more than 7,200 volunteer educators (Jacob, 2020).

Much research has demonstrated the benefits in the lives of those who attend U3A (Adamo et al., 2017). There is greater socialisation and a sense of more active lives was observed among participants who had attended educational programmes at the institution, which, in turn, suggests benefits for quality ageing (Teixeira, 2017). Moreover, participation in SUs generates impacts in other areas, such as social relations, the learning process and the promotion of a more active life (Santos;

Lopes; Lobão, 2018). Other studies highlight improvements in health and physical state, reduced sense of loneliness and depression, and a fall in the use of anti-anxiety medications (Jacob; Lisa; Pocinho, 2019; Ricardo, 2016).

Still, the particular characteristics of the educators of the elderly within contexts of non-formal education are scarce (Cachioni , 2018). Pocinho, Lacerda and Santos (2015) point out that educators perform a central role in the operation of pedagogic practices in SUs and, therefore, must be prepared to meet the members' educational needs, keeping in mind the fact that these are a heterogeneous and diverse group of learners regarding their education levels.

The research question of this study focuses on: what are the main attributes necessary for educators of Portuguese SU members? The aim of this paper was to identify the set of personal and professional characteristics recommended for educators, based on the perspectives of SU members (older learners over 50 years of age), educators and technical professionals (researchers and specialists) engaged in the field of older adult education. It is hoped that the results of this research will contribute to the debate on the teaching-learning processes involving older learners, proceeding from gerontological reflections with a focus on the educators.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, exploratory approach and it was developed in a virtual environment with the support of RUTIS – recognised as an institution of public interest which represents the Portuguese SUs for the purposes of promoting active ageing. RUTIS is legally constituted as a Private Institution for Social Solidarity (IPSS), founded on 21 November, 2005, headquartered in Almeirim, in the district of Santarém, Portugal.

The internet was chosen as a resource for data collection as it is highly agile and allows quick engagement with respondents' data. According to Faleiros et al. (2016), online questionnaires are considered to be an alternative approach as a result of the wide use of the internet across diverse audiences; in addition, they provide the researcher with more agility in the development of scientific research.

Chart 1 presents the set of questions used in the online questionnaires according to the target audiences of this study: seniors (older learners), educators and technical professionals (researchers and specialists). The questionnaires were designed by employing the Google Docs tool, and they were comprised of open questions with the intention of allowing respondents to provide expansive answers.

Chart 1 – Questions directed to the target audiences of this research

Target audience	Questions in the online questionnaire
Seniors	(Q1) – As a learner, what do you consider to be most important in order to be an educator in a senior university?
	(Q2) – As a learner, which advice would you give to a person who is starting to give classes to older learners?
Educators	(Q3) – What do you consider to be most important in order to be an educator in a senior university?
	(Q4) – What advice would you give to a person who is starting to give classes to older learners?
	(Q5) – What are the main challenges when teaching older learners?
Technical professionals (researchers and specialists)	(Q6) - What do you consider to be most important in order to be an educator in a senior university?
	(Q7) - What advice would you give to a person who is starting to give classes to older learners?

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The criteria established for the selection of the participant technical professionals (researchers and specialists) were their scope of practice in the fields of ageing and education for older adults, as well as their experience with activities developed in SUs. Thus, the online questionnaires were sent as an invitation letter by private email from each of the technicians. Educators and SU members were invited to complete the online questionnaire through links provided on the RUTIS Facebook page, which lists over 14,000 followers. The data for this research was collected between the 7th and the 27th of November 2019.

The data sample comprises of 144 SU members, 103 educators and 18 technical professionals. It is important to note that amidst the educators, 89% of them were volunteers in SUs, 85% mentioned that they were fully satisfied with their position as volunteer educators, and 46% reported to be continuously working with their SUs for longer than 4 years. What is more, 52% (54) of the educators reported that they were 61 years old or over, among whom 28% (15) were between 71 and 80 years old and 5% (3) were over 81 years old.

The results were submitted to content analysis, which encompasses

> […] a set of techniques for the analysis of the communications with the aim to obtain – through systematic and objective procedures of content description of the messages – indicators (either quantitative or not) which allow for inference of knowledge regarding the conditions of production/reception (inferred variables) of these messages (Bardin, 2016, p. 48).

As a result, the methodological procedures followed three stages in this study, in line with Bardin (2016). It the first stage, pre-analysis, after skim-reading the messages, three thematic axes (technical, affective and difficulties) were identified in conformity with the rules of exhaustivity, representativity, homogeneity and pertinence to the study.

The messages were organised and systematised at the second stage, material exploration, and they were submitted to thematic, categorical coding. Thus, the messages related to the questions (except for Q5) were grouped together in four main categories (and further subcategories) under the technical and affective axes, namely: 1) knowledge; 2) ability (to identify the learners' demands, to communicate and to interact with the older learners); 3) attention (to make oneself available, to share with and listen to the older learners); and 4) expression, which comprised a set of personal qualities mentioned by the participants.

Messages in relation to Q5, which were directed to the educators only, constitute the third thematic axis – difficulties – and were organised into five categories: 1) physical or cognitive abilities; 2) heterogeneity of the older learners; 3) pedagogic organisation and practice; 4) others; and 5) no difficulties. Simple frequency and cooccurrence measurement (when there were more than one registration unit – that is, recorded reference "[…] content segment considered base unit" (Bardin, 2016, p. 134) – within the same contextual unit) were employed for data treatment.

In the last methodological stage, interpretation and evidence inference were used to confer meanings on data descriptions, having, as a reference point, the geragogical principles and approaches in the field of educational gerontology. All results were processed by the computer program[2] for the organisation and exploration of the data. For the category of expression, a word cloud tool was employed to create a graphic visualisation of the data.

Results

This study has identified the aspects which characterise educators who play a part – or will play a part – in Portuguese SUs. In addition, the principal difficulties faced by educators in the teaching-learning process were also evidenced, thereby complementing consideration of the subject. The data from this research showed the technical area corresponding to gerontological and educational knowledge and professional skills aligned with the teaching theme (for example, information technology, literature or photography); and the affective area, in turn, as a set of personal and expressive attitudes and qualities considered desirable to those who teach seniors.

Chart 2 presents the categorical organisation of the responses provided by the 265 participants in accordance with the three thematic axes: technical, affective and difficulties.

Chart 2 – Thematic axes, categories, subcategories and their respective examples of responses

Thematic axes and definitions	Categories, subcategories e sample examples*
Technical (Code: T) Refers to the participants' messages related to technical knowledge and abilities, which may include pedagogic practices and facilitating strategies (approaches used by educators in order to facilitate or support the practice of teaching older people).	**1. Knowledge** (Code: TK) E3TK101**: *"Knowledge and competences in the area in question, ability to communicate and pedagogical competencies".*
	2. Ability (Code: TA)
	2.1 Identify (Code: TAI) T6TAI13: *"To know what the older students would like to develop within the topic for which [the educator] was requested".*
	2.2 Communicate (Code: TAC) S1TAC25: *"Ability to communicate".*
	2.3 Interact (Code: TAT) E3TAT51: *"The [educator's] ability to have a good relationship with the learners".*
Affective (Code: A) Refers to the participants' messages related to social and affective abilities, as well as personal and expressive qualities.	**3. Attention** (Code: AA)
	3.1 Availability (Code: AAA) E4AAA43: *"Availability and versatility".*
	3.2 Share (Code: AAS) S1AAS85: *"To share knowledge. Older students have fantastic life stories".*
	3.3 Listen (Code: AAL) S2AAL68: *"To know how to listen to the experiences lived and shared by the students".*
	4. Expression (Code: AE) E4AE48: *"Empathy, patience, dedication".*
Difficulties (Code: D) Refers to the educator' messages related to the main difficulties when teaching older adults.	**1. Physical and cognitive abilities** (Code: DA) E5DA43: *"[learners'] dexterity and ability to comprehending, which sometimes are no longer adequate".*
	2. Heterogeneity of the seniors (Code: DH) E5DH62: *"Heterogeneity among levels of knowledge [and the learners] learning ability. These are challenging for any educator".*
	3. Pedagogic organisation and practice (Code: DP) E5DP5: *"To find topics which are interesting to this target audience".*
	4. Others (Code: DO) E5DO57: *"To receive the news about a student's death".*
	5. No difficulties (Code: DN) E5DN60: *"Honestly, there is no difficulty, only the feeling of pleasure and satisfaction".*

* Some messages used as illustrations may belong to more than one category.
** Explanation of the code used. Example: E3TC101 – (E = educator (research participant group); 3 = question (number corresponding to the question of the online questionnaire); T = Technical (thematic axis identified); K = knowledge (thematic area category); 101 = participant (research participant identification number).
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 1, below, refers to the simple frequency of the categories under analysis in relation to questions, except for Q5 (What are the main challenges when teaching older learners?) regarding the technical and affective axes. Generally, according to the data analysed, it is observed that affective aspects referring to social abilities and personal qualities were indicated as important attributes to educators of older learners, according to the recording units analysed. For the SU members, the technical axis was more prominent with reference to Q1 (As a learner, what do you consider to be most important in order to be an educator in a senior university?), especially the category of knowledge (36%); addressing Q2 (As a learner, which advice would you give to a person who is starting to give classes to older learners?), the affective axis stood out with most of the registration units as part of the category of expression (64%).

For the educators, in both Q3 (What do you consider to be most important in order to be an educator in a senior university?) and Q4 (What advice would you give to a person who is starting to give classes to older learners?), the affective axis was reported as the most important, and thus recommended for those who are starting to give classes to older learners, being the expression category of most prominence – comprising 43% and 46% of the answers, respectively. In turn, with regard to the technical professionals (researchers and specialists), the technical axis was most evidenced, especially the category of knowledge which was present in 44% and 56% of the registration units regarding Q6 (What do you consider to be most important in order to be an educator in a senior university?) and Q7 (What advice would you give to a person who is starting to give classes to older learners?), respectively.

Table 1 – Frequency of Categories and Subcategories referring to the axes of Technical and Affective according to the participants

Categories and Subcategories		Seniors N* (%)		Educators N (%)		Technical professionals N (%)		Total N (%)
		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q6	Q7	
Technical Axis	1. Knowledge	40(36)	20(26)	21(30)	6(15)	8(44)	10(56)	105(31)
	2. Abilities	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	2.1 Identify	8(7)	28(36)	11(16)	18(46)	6(33)	4(22)	75(22)
	2.2 Communicate	39(35)	10(13)	16(23)	6(15)	1(6)	3(17)	75(22)
	2.3 Interact	25(22)	20(26)	21(30)	9(23)	3(17)	1(6)	79(24)
	Subtotal N	112	78	69	39	18	18	334
Affective Axis	3. Attention	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	3.1 Availability	11(12)	13(15)	12(17)	19(21)	2(17)	3(43)	60(17)
	3.2 Share	26(29)	13(15)	21(29)	15(16)	0	1(14)	76(21)
	3.3 Listen	2(2)	6(7)	8(11)	15(16)	1(8)	0	32(9)
	4. Expression	51(57)	57(64)	31(43)	42(46)	9(75)	3(43)	193(53)
	Subtotal N	90	89	72	91	12	7	361

* N value amounts to the number of registration units identified in the messages.
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Technical Axis

Professional education, mastering content and the application of appropriate teaching methods in line with the learners' profiles were considered important knowledge for the educators of older adults. Among the messages from seniors, the following stand out: "To master the theme(s) of the disciplines they will teach, to have background education in pedagogy" (S1TK53); which expresses agreement with the messages of educators and technical professionals: "Careful preparation of the classes, adaptation of the materials to be used according to the participants' needs, as well as the updating of content to be covered with some strategic adjustments when noticing the need to return to material previously covered" (E3TK89); "To have some sort of formal education in the field of education for adults and, preferably, for older adults" (T6TK21).

The results point to a need, by the part of the educators, to create favourable conditions for experience sharing in the learning environments, being important and recommended to interact and communicate with the older learners, as observed in the following illustrative messages: "To get to know each and every learner, as well as their specific difficulties" (E4TAI10); "To make an effort to get to know your group and try to find out about their interests" (S2TAI117).

Furthermore, the ability to identify the older learners' needs and recognise them as a heterogeneous group, in a manner which does not infantilise them within the learning context, was also emphasised in the participants' contributions, as seen in the following messages: "[The educator] should be conscious about the fact that they are teaching older adults, not children!" (S2TAI78) e "Not to treat us like children" (S1TAI96).

Affective Axis

Figure 1 represents the word cloud created from the material comprising the expression category – with larger frequency in the affective axis (53%). Out of 34 different words, patience was referred to 70 times with the highest frequency among the SU members' messages (47 times), while the word empathy was mentioned 38 times in the total of responses analysed.

Figure 1 – Word Cloud representing the Category of 'Expression'

Source: Compiled by the authors[3].

The technical professionals and educators highlight the importance of patience as an inherent attribute in teaching, as seen in the following messages: "To be patient and understanding, considering that each person has their own learning rhythm" (T6AE8) e "Knowledge and dedication to the other. It is very important to have the patience and the ability to respect each learner's condition keeping them interested and motivated" (E3TKAE60).

Noticeably, cooccurrences between axes, categories and subcategories were evidenced. With regard to the total of respondents (N=265), the complementarity between the technical and affective axes was verified in 25% of the answers to Q1, Q3 and Q6, while in 14% of the answers to Q2, Q4 and Q7.

Difficulties Axis

Addressing the third thematic axis identified in this study – difficulties – 35% of the 76 educators who answered Q5 mentioned difficulties in pedagogic organisation and practice, be this due to the scarcity of pedagogic materials and resources, or due to constant learner absence, duration of classes and the number of learners per classroom, as observed in the following: "Classes with many participants and high levels of absence" (E5DP52); "To have time to give attention to everyone, to manage expectations and some disagreements" (E5DP20); "To have no manuals or adequate materials" (E5DP27); "Keep them [the older learners] active during the class" (E5DP72) e "To contextualize the classes" (E5DP10).

The older adults' heterogeneity regarding their life experiences, knowledge, expectations and motivations for learning was presented as challenging for 24% of the educators, who defined this difficulty in the teaching process as, for instance, an "Extreme unevenness among the learners" (E5DP59). The same number of educators (24%), however, reported having no difficulties when teaching older adults. With regard to the categories of physical and cognitive abilities and others, these comprise 14% and 3% of the total number of messages, respectively.

Discussion

This study has demonstrated a set of characteristics which reflect what is required to be an educator in Portuguese SUs. The multiple perspectives on the theme evidence the fact that focusing on technical and, more importantly, affective aspects is fundamental for educators, helping them to overcome the main challenges in the teaching-learning process.

It has also been shown the importance for educators to identify the principal learning needs of their learners, while being careful not to infantilise them within the educational context. For the older adults, the use of childish language – termed as secondary baby talk (Caporael;

Lukaszewski; Culbertson, 1983) – manifests prejudicial attitudes which, in turn, reinforce the stereotypical view of all older people having cognitive deficits and, thus, require more simplified language and slow delivery (Nelson, 2005). As Palmore (2015) reports, expanding knowledge about the multiple dimensions of the ageing process is a strategic task to reverse ageism (age discrimination), by raising people's awareness of the negative impact of the issue, as well as of the practical conditions to reduce it at individual and collective levels.

The results of this study suggest that the educators' acquisition of knowledge help them in the organisation of their teaching, offer them facilitative strategies to overcome difficulties encountered in the application of pedagogic practices, along with enhancing understanding of gerontologic aspects which are present in the teaching process.

Showcasing good communication skills and knowing how to interact with older learners are other abilities mentioned by the participants as important and recommended to the educators, as these seek to establish a harmonious teacher-learner relationship. Boulton-Lewis and Tam (2018) note that instructors of older learners must be flexible in their teaching approaches. Within an SU learning context, Pocinho, Lacerda and Santos (2015) reinforce the pertinence of more captivating teaching techniques, which are grounded in communication with and proximity to the older learners. The principles of the geragogic practice are supported by collective experience and dialogue, which expand the possibilities of negotiation about the content and methodological strategies employed in the learning process, while also considering the learners' social and political contexts (Findsen; Formosa, 2011).

Regarding the personal qualities of those who teach older learners, the patience is presented as a necessary trait of the educators, especially from the learners' perspective. This corroborates Flauzino et al. (2020) study, in which patience was perceived by older learners as the most appropriate attribute for instructors of digital literacy. The authors argue that the internalisation of negative stereotypes about ageing by the elderly may justify their suggestion of patience amongst instructors. These assumptions were confirmed by the results of their research, where the participant older learners indicated generalisation in learning difficulties and cognitive deficits amongst all older learners, using the third person plural in their messages. Similarly, this was observed in the responses to Q2 (As a learner, which advice would you give to a person who is starting to give classes to older learners?): "Being patient, since seniors have more difficulty learning" (S2TAIAE73) e "Have a lot of patience, since the students are of some age and their memory is not very good" (S2AE75).

However, in the messages provided by other participants of the study (educators and technical professionals), patience was not related to prejudice against age, but to the observation of heterogeneity amidst the learners and to considering the delivery of teaching practice. It is possible to argue, therefore, that the characteristic of being patient

presents different meanings within an educational context: from the older learners' perspectives, attitudes of implicit ageism are noted, in this case, age-related stereotypes manifested implicitly without the person's conscious awareness (Levy; Banaji, 2002); while in the educators and technical professionals' view, the need to avoid paternalist practices is indicated, that is, practices in which the educators assume responsibilities for the learners' motivation and educational needs (Formosa, 2002).

The second 'expression' of most importance for the educators, in this present study – the empathy – being sometimes considered as a strategy for the inclusion in the teaching-learning practice. For Ko (2020), empathy refers to the adequate understanding by the instructors of the learners' psychosocial, emotional, and gender dimensions, as well as to the ability to motivate learners and facilitate bonds with and among them. The author investigated the successful patterns of interaction between instructors and Asian learners with low educational levels (45 to 80 years of age) in a literacy programme. The theoretical model to advance learner empowerment presented by Ko (2020) – comprised of three stages: empathy, engagement and empowerment – suggests the development of a comfortable and challenging learning environment by the instructors, from which they may gradually reduce their involvement as the learners take control over their own learning and share knowledge among each other.

In this regard, when considering the inclusive, educational approach presented by Wlodkowski (1999), Findsen e Formosa (2011, p. 108) report that "[…] positive rapport between teacher and learner provides a feeling of social inclusion that generates much motivation and enthusiasm, and consequently, a sense of community". The educator's attention to making themselves available, sharing knowledge and listening to the learners comprise the remaining results obtained in this research, and enhances our understanding that a personal relationship permeates the teaching-learning process beyond the domain of techniques, as explained by Jarvis (2004, p. 195): "Fundamentally, teaching is a human process, in which the educators themselves may well be the best instruments that they have in helping learners to both learn their subject and achieve their potential".

The number of participants in this research constitutes one of the limitations of the study, since the SUs registered with RUTIS represent more than 68,000 members across seniors, educators and coordinators. It is important to emphasise, therefore, the need to conduct more research on the theme in question, encompassing other elements so to better understand the technical-affective aspects presented in this study by educators - for instance, beliefs towards old age, the purpose of educational practices and further sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

Conclusion

In geragogic practices, the educator's attitude and approach represent a key element in the development of educational activities. This study has identified a set of abilities and qualities which are characteristics of being an educator in Portuguese SUs. From the older adults, educators and technical professionals' perspectives, it is important and recommended that educators of older learners bring together technical and affective characteristics, which, in turn, have a direct impact on the teaching-learning process.

The results of this study demonstrate how complex geragogic practice is; one which requires of the educators the expression of specific qualities, the mastering of communication skills, interaction with and identification of the older learners' educational needs, in addition to technical knowledge and methodological approaches. Such personal and professional characteristics are consistent with the humanistic teaching approach proposed by theorist Jarvis (2004).

In this sense, the adoption of a technical-affective model is, thus, suggested for the teaching of older learners, while also being attentive to attitudes of availability, sharing and listening with the aim to establish an empathetic and patient relationship with learners. This research expands the debate on education for seniors and presents the need for more research on the subject, which may reveal more information about who educators for seniors are.

Notes

1 Andragogy is presented by Malcolm Knowles as the theory that helps adults learn. The model of assumptions for adult learning under a conceptual framework and the disregard of social and historical structures in this process constitute the main criticisms of this theory. See Findsen and Formosa (2011).

2 *Software* NVivo (version 10).

3 Word cloud developed with the tools available on wordclouds.com.

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