

# **(H)OLD ON PROJECT – EDUCATION AND PARTICIPATION IN THE COMMUNITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LEADERS**

**Sofia Bergano, Graça Santos, Luísa Cramês**

*Escola Superior de Educação, Instituto Politécnico de Bragança; CEAD – Research Centre on Adult Education and Community Intervention, Universidade do Algarve (PORTUGAL)]*

## **Abstract**

This communication aims to disseminate the research carried out in the (H)OLD ON Project - Civic participation of older adults in Senior Universities and in the local community. This is a participatory education and research project, implemented in Senior Universities (SU) in the northeast of Trás-os-Montes, Portugal. A culture of education and lifelong learning, centered on the location and with an impact on the community, values active citizenship in various situations, and in this specific case, in the contexts of non-formal education in the US. It is worth mentioning the project's intention to start with the mobilization of participatory dynamics in the various moments of its realization. Leaders play an important role in this decision-making process and in creating opportunities for active and participatory citizenship. It is possible to identify different situations in the Portuguese reality, depending on the origin and management of the US, verifying that in some cases, the leader is, at the same time, manager-teacher-student. It is interesting to reflect on the relationship between the effects of leadership decisions and the consolidation of the role of older adults in education and civic participation processes. The project asks how the civic participation of older adults in the SU can be a way of maintaining the awareness of an active citizenship, which continues to contribute to social dynamics, despite no longer being part of a professional activity. One of the objectives recommended by the project is to analyse the effects of participation, on the participants and on the community, taking into account the different dynamics of implementation. Using a qualitative methodology for data analysis, the investigation included, in addition to other techniques, interviews with SU educators to assess their perception of the students' potential for participation and, if possible, involve them. in the project and also to the leaders of the SU, to assess the impact of the project on the institution and on the people involved, as well as on the communities in which they operate. The evaluation of the project's impact on the community was considered in the planning process of the community intervention and took into account the particularities of specific projects developed in each of the SUs. It should be noted that participation in the project was conditioned by the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the functioning of the institutions. As a result, it is worth mentioning the recognition of the relevance of the project, by the leaders of the SU and by the participants. Despite the support of the leaders for the project, it is necessary to continue to promote initiatives of this nature, which promote the effective civic participation of older adults in the community, in educational processes and in personal and social development.

Keywords: Lifelong education, civic participation in the community, older adults, Leadership at Senior Universities.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

The civic participation of older people is a relevant topic for adult education. The current policy guidelines arise in the context of neoliberal globalization and mobilization towards the knowledge society [1] and encourage opportunities for participation in lifelong learning situations. It is therefore necessary to make a joint effort to envisage change in the face of current challenges, to improve the adult learning system in order to enhance productivity, improve quality of life and develop active citizenship [2]. Thus, it is important to address participation and citizenship [3], particularly in improving participation in adult learning and education and investing in citizenship education. In an increasingly competitive society, staying active until later in life is an individual and simultaneously a social need. As Canário, Vieira, and Capucha [4] point out, we must demystify the idea of the generalized institutionalization of people over sixty-four, despite the unfavorable economic conditions for part of this population, at the material and economic level, but also at the level of social and civic participation and autonomy.

People live longer and stay active for more years, and time management before and after retirement is a current challenge, with effective implications for political and social measures, both public and private. Based on research proposals and practices in adult education in the contemporary world [5], the central

focus of the project presented in this article is based on a culture of education and lifelong learning, centered on place and with impact on the community. It is fundamental to value education, as Lima [6] states, in line with Freire, "education is, ultimately, an ongoing process of humanization and liberation of human beings". It is also worth mentioning the potential of the community, through the contribution of community development projects [7], which favor the improvement of living conditions and combat the constraints caused by aging [8]. It is important to attend to the living conditions of older people and municipal social services [9], in order to create conditions for an active, dynamic and adjusted participation to the needs of the individual and the community itself. As stated by Evans, Kurantowicz and Lucio-Villegas [10], it is necessary to "remake communities and adult learning", with the vicissitudes and circumstances because this is the place and natural context in which people live. Making it a favorable environment for their development and sustainable development constitutes an educational purpose, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals from Agenda 2030 (SDG), namely, "Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, and Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" [11].

By contributing to the civic participation of older people through Senior Universities (SU), it is assumed that these are hubs of intervention and citizen participation. SU are considered an integral part of the concept of lifelong learning, being recognized worldwide, where seniors can participate in various activities [12]. In the origin of SU it is important to distinguish two models, the French model and the English model [13]. The French model is based on formal education and teachers are paid. The English model is based on mutual help, where older people can collaborate in the development of the curriculum as teachers, students, volunteers and leaders. In Portugal US follows the English model, due to the fact that these are created by non-governmental and third sector organizations, having an important role in the promotion of non-formal and informal education in adults and the elderly [14].

This article advocates the valorization of active citizenship in various situations, particularly in the contexts of non-formal education of SU. Understanding education as a personal task of the individual, throughout life, as a way to be active and inserted into society [15], presents itself as a challenge for social organizations, more specifically those aimed at older people, such as the SU [16]. In the Portuguese reality, the origin and management of SUs is diverse, being usually linked to associations or municipalities. The leadership may be associated with lived experiences of the phenomena that marked Portuguese politics and society, particularly in the 20th century, projected into the current democratic reality of the 21st century. It is understood that SU leadership is assumed by professionals/technicians or by other leaders, namely former teachers or professionals who in their active professional life have also assumed leadership functions. In several situations, the leader is simultaneously manager-teacher-student.

In this article, special emphasis is given to the leadership of the SU participating in the project. This focus is justified because it is considered that in the development of projects aimed at the participation and protagonism of the learner, the styles of relationship established in the educational context can somehow enhance or inhibit the participation of the learner. It is also important to state the important role that leadership plays in the decision-making process and in creating opportunities for an active and participatory citizenship.

## **2 (H)OLD ON PROJECT - PARTICIPATORY EDUCATION AND RESEARCH**

The (H)OLD ON Project - Civic participation of older people in Senior Universities and local community is, in essence, a project of participatory education and research. It is aimed at older people and is implemented in the SU of north-eastern Transmontano, Portugal. The project contributes with an in-depth and scientifically based vision, which starts from the knowledge of the lived experiences of older people and proposes active interaction and participation dynamics. It contemplates an educational intervention focused on active participation in the community, valuing the personal resources of older people, 'from', 'for' and 'with' the community, through a participatory action research methodology (PRI). This aims to produce knowledge and generate positive changes in the context under study, through a research design in which research is a participatory, horizontal and collaborative process, involving participants in the (co)construction of knowledge.

Through a participatory educational process, we seek the collaborative construction of social and civic intervention projects focused on the needs identified in each community and, simultaneously, that respond to the interests of the participants and enhance their individual capabilities and potentialities and those developed in the collective.

In the first phase (A), the project included presentation and self-awareness activities and the identification, recognition and development of personal and group skills (B), through the dynamization of group dynamics, in order to build group identity. After mobilizing the group's identity, we proceeded with the diagnosis of the community's needs (C) and selection and organization of the project (D). The project implementation and evaluation phase included the identification of areas of interest, design, and implementation of the project in each SU, with the active involvement and participation of the participants. To this end, we designed the materials for the promotion of activities (organization and planning of sessions; description of activities; specific resources).

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

Using a methodological approach based on participatory action research, according to the perspective of Hearne and Murphy [17], we sought to value the perspectives of the social actors involved in the process. It should be noted that the methodological design of the study considered the fundamental axes of PRA: research, in the sense that the purpose of research is to produce knowledge and, concomitantly, action, since the intention is to generate positive changes in the context under study; and participation, in the sense that research is, in itself, a participatory, horizontal and collaborative process [18]. According to this methodology, data collection techniques were diverse: interviews, focus groups and the documents produced throughout the intervention.

In this article, which focuses on the role of the leaders of the US, we highlight the data collected through interviews with the educators of the US, to assess their perception of the students' potential for participation and, if possible, to involve them in the project, and also with the leaders of the US, to assess the impact of the project on the institution and the people involved, as well as on the communities in which they live. The role of leaders in these institutions has been analyzed [19] and allowed us to identify the diversity of leaders' profiles, as well as their motivations for exercising activities in these educational responses. In the (H)OLD ON project, data collection from US leaders aimed to (i) assess the implementation of the project, namely its impact on the community, (ii) identify the main difficulties perceived in the implementation of the project, and (iii) analyze the possibility of integrating a training offer of the US that has as its principle the construction of an intervention project in the community. The choice of interview is justified by the intention to give voice to the participants and understand the reality from their point of view [20]. To this end, an interview script was developed.

### **4 RESULTS**

The evaluation of the project's impact on the community was considered at all times in the planning process of the community intervention and took into account the particularities of the specific projects developed in each of the SU. It should be noted that participation in the project was conditioned by the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the functioning of the institutions. This impact was felt in the first phase of the project, when some of the SU invited to participate declined because they considered that they were not yet able to resume their activities in person. Subsequently, and in compliance with the health regulations regarding the control of the pandemic situation, this situation led to interruptions in the implementation of the project. In addition, the attendance of some of the participants in the sessions fluctuated due to occasional situations of prophylactic isolation.

The focus of this article is oriented towards the analysis of the SU leaders' assessment of the functioning of the [H]OLD ON Project and the importance of promoting the participation of older people in their learning process and in the community.

The two SU in which the project was implemented have leaders who value the perspective of education for participation in the community. This fact turned out to be very visible in the way the project was welcomed and the conditions for its implementation were created.

Another aspect that stands out is the participation of both in tasks and activities, in one case as an intervener and participant in the project and, in the other case, assuming a role of coordination and facilitation with institutions outside the SU in which the projects of each SU were developed.

The data collected in the interview confirms this attitude, namely through the shared view that the people who attend the SU are citizens with an enormous potential for intervention in the community and that this participation is unequivocally beneficial both for the community and for the students in the US. Since they are people with more free time and many skills that allow an effective contribution to community development. In addition, there is the perception that this type of contact of older people with the

community also contributes to the reduction of ageism and the deconstruction of prejudices associated with the aging process.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The relationship between the effects of leadership decisions and the consolidation of the protagonism of older people in the processes of education and civic participation was the focus of this article. By questioning the civic participation of older people in SU as a way to maintain awareness of an active citizenship, which continues to contribute to social dynamics, despite no longer being part of a professional activity, this project raised on the ground, and in an articulated manner, dynamics of participation. As a matter of fact, one of the objectives of the project is to analyze the effects of participation, on the participants and on the community, taking into account the different dynamics of implementation.

In this articulation (to be promoted) between individuals and their communities, the principle of endogeneity in the scope of adult education becomes relevant, by valuing the knowledge of adult people and local knowledge [4]. This principle is materialized by a project of this nature, which values what older people know or want to learn to do in order to act in their communities and simultaneously (co)build with older people, spaces and projects that realize their participation and contribute to building more inclusive societies.

Regarding the difficulties or constraints perceived during the implementation of the project, we highlight the constraints related to Covid-19, in the sense that the leaders felt the responsibility to promote a project that involves the relationship of the older students with elements of the community, in a context where the risks of contagion and the repercussions of the disease on the older ones are not at all negligible. This issue led to decisions about the start of the project, the breaks and restarts being, in both cases, marked by caution.

Finally, the recognition of the relevance of the project, by the SU leaderships and the participants, should be highlighted. It is necessary to continue promoting initiatives about the effective civic participation of older people in the community, in educational processes and personal and social development, also considering the important role of leaders. It is necessary to value what older adults know, their interests, often acquired and developed throughout their lives.

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