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Exploring the impacts of distance higher education on adult learners' lives and reclaiming lifelong learning as a human development process

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Abstract

This article intends to launch discussion and reflection on two main themes: lifelong learning and digital literacy in nowadays societies. In looking for the intersections between these concepts to connote them with a more humanistic and holistic perspective, we explore the potentials of distance learning in the lives of adult learners. The empirical basis for this exploration is a survey applied to 706 (143 respondents) graduates in the education of the Portuguese Open University to know their future projects and the impact of this degree in the various dimensions of their personal, social and professional lives. The conclusions of this analysis point to recognition, by the respondents, of the positive impacts that distance higher education has in their personal and social lives. However, these impacts are not as visible in professional terms since the answers show little significant professional progressions. In this sense, the article concludes that it is important to rethink the founding ideas of the concept of lifelong learning from a humanistic perspective and to approach it with a holistic and transversal conception of what is now defined as digital literacy. Distance education, for adult learners, is a scenario that not only strengthens the personal, social and professional development of individuals, but also the development of competencies applied not only to the digital world but also to each person's daily activities.

Keywords: Adult Education, Lifelong Learning, Online Higher Education, Human Development, Portuguese Open University graduates

Introduction

This article focuses on the pathways and living conditions of students of the Portuguese Open University (UAb), who complete their higher education degrees in adulthood, working full-time, specifically, graduates of the Degree in Education. The main goal of the research presented in this article is to know the students' future projects and the impacts of this degree in the various dimensions of their lives, both personal and professional.

This is an area that has attracted a growing research interest that has been carried out on Portuguese graduates (Gonçalves, 2000; Alves, 2003; Alves, 2005; Gonçalves & Menezes, 2014; OPSD-UA, 2015). This growing interest stems from changes, on the one hand, in social, economic and political conditions at the global and national levels and, on the other hand, on the increase of students entering adult higher education at a later stage of life than the traditional one (shortly after completing high school in an ongoing school course).

The issues that concern adults in higher education and their pathways after completion of the first cycle of higher education are particularly important in this article, as Portuguese Open University students have a specific profile –working adults, with family and professional responsibilities. In the panorama of Portuguese higher education institutions, the singularity of Portuguese Open University stems not only from the profile of its students but also from the fact that it is the only Portuguese public university in distance education.

The Portuguese Open University degree in Education follows a curricular structure that combines a 'major' that guarantees a basic curriculum in Education with two 'minors', understood as training courses that guarantee the deepening of knowledge in a scientific and professional area, according to the training project of each student (Minor in Social Pedagogy and Education and Minor in Education and Reading).

The student that chooses this graduate course is usually somebody who wants to improve skills to understand and intervene in the educational field and also develop skills to intervene in different contexts of formal and non-formal education, contributing to the development of individuals and social groups. This Degree is intended for persons wishing to perform functions within social organizations and institutional bodies with educational responsibilities.

Responding to the demands of the Digital Society, the Open University Education graduates have the professional skills to intervene in systems, programs, projects, processes and educational and training actions, in face-to-face and digital contexts, as well as in-depth intervention skills in processes of development throughout the life of people and groups, in the personal, professional, social and cultural contexts.

The data analyzed in this paper results from the application of a questionnaire built within the scope of the Observatory of Professional and Life Pathways of the Graduates of the Open University. This questionnaire was prepared in 2015, with slight adjustments (which do not compromise the comparability of data between different moments of collection) in the first semester of 2017. The questionnaire is composed of questions that are grouped into 5 large blocks, reflecting the dimensions that intended to analyze:

(a) the profile of graduates, including social origins, area of residence and educational and pro-
    fessional path, prior to the course;
(b) the course at the Open University, the reasons and modalities for admission, the duration of
    its completion, the professional situation throughout the course and the conditions of study;
(c) the balance of skills and relationships, including the respondents' representations about the
    skills developed and the relationships built in the degree;
(d) the perceived impact of the degree, not only on working conditions and trajectories, but also
    on family, cultural and civic life;
(e) future projects, including needs and interests of higher education and throughout life.

The questionnaire was applied to all individuals who completed their degree in Education at UAb between 2011 and 2015, in two phases:

(i) the first phase of information collection took place between July and October 2015 and was
     addressed to all those who had completed their degree in 2011, 2012 or 2013. Of the 272
     graduates in this three-year period, 77 (28.3%) responded.
(ii) the second phase of information collection took place during the month of May 2017 and was
     addressed to all who had completed their degree in 2014 or 2015. Of the 162 graduates in this
     biennium, 66 (40.7%) responded.

In this article we intend to explore and understand:

• Different perspectives on Lifelong Learning and articulations between lifelong learning and
  Digital Literacies and the intersections between both perspectives.
• The impact of the Education degree in the Portuguese Open University in the various dimen-
  sions of the students' lives (personal, social, and professional).

Literature Review

Reclaiming the point of Lifelong learning

The importance of lifelong learning is crystallized in our societies through documents and speeches published by supranational and national organizations worldwide such as the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the World Bank and the European Union (EU). Thus, educational reforms, particularly in the European Union' countries, since the 1990s have been guided by the recommendations of these international organizations that, through an abundant production of documents and the development of statistical projects, emphasize the centrality of education and its ability to guarantee employability, avoiding social exclusion, promoting citizenship and personal development. The desired scenarios for the evolution of societies in the official discourses and documents emphasize the importance of learning and access to skills, competencies, and knowledge, as determinants of an adaptation of societies to the globalization of economies and technological and social changes (UNESCO, 2016). At the heart of this vision is the idea of Lifelong Learning.

The attributes most commonly associated with the idea of lifelong learning are the fact that it is associated with the entire life cycle and, in addition to being lifelong, it is also associated with all contexts and spheres of life (life wide) (Barrett & Garrett, 2009).

These various intergovernmental influences that circulate around lifelong learning mean that its definition remains vague and imprecise, needing to have a critical analysis in order to be implemented as a political project. In a previous research Neves (2005) focused on the comparison of lifelong education policies between five member states of the European Union and relating them to the specific contexts from which they emerge. The conclusions pointed that, although there is a strong pressure for the governments of the European Union to shape their education and training policies according to supranational recommendations and guidelines, the truth is that education and training systems national training programs continue to be influenced by a broader social, economic, political and cultural context. As a consequence, there is no single model of education and training policies that prevails and the trends that emerge are naturally and inevitably complex. At the same time there are several theoretically frameworks around the lifelong learning idea.

Berglund (2008) presents a synthesis of the most common theoretical perspectives in lifelong learning research identifying three groups of theoretical frameworks. In a first group, Berglund refers to conceptual and philosophical studies, related to the issue of values, where one usually seeks to define and problematize learning as a concept or a phenomenon. Most of the research in this group is based on the analysis of lifelong learning over time. The research is usually extensive in nature and analyses different philosophical and ideological perspectives around education, economics and learning, relating most individual aspects to the aspects linked to the development of societies (Berglund, 2008). In the second group identified by Berglund (2008), we have research on lifelong learning that focuses on the political analysis on the phenomenon, and seeks to deepen issues related to education, the economy and the relationship with global markets, the processes of globalization, the purposes of models of development, democratic participation and building active citizenship, implementing policies, etc. In a third group, Berglund (2008) refers to studies that focus on the different social contexts where lifelong learning occurs, such as schools, learning communities, universities, companies, etc., etc. The author draws attention to the fact that these research themes are not mutually exclusive, on the contrary, the boundaries that separate them are not always clear, and it is often difficult to separate research on lifelong learning from research on education.

We believe that the research presented in this article does not fit into the groups mentioned above, because we start from a broad understanding of what lifelong education is and do not focus on a concept of lifelong education circumscribed in formal contexts of learning, or at specific ages. The study presented here is part of the analysis of a set of data related to the graduates of a degree obtained at an open university, a formal course, but seeks to read these data in the light of a conception of lifelong learning as a process of personal, social and professional construction very much related to the basic principles of distance education.

Hence there are several conceptual debates around lifelong education but mainly they focus essentially on the different connotations and interpretations that it has been subject to, depending on the political objectives it aims to achieve (Field, 2006; Biesta, 2006, Canário, 2003; Lima, 2003). Authors like Biesta (2006) state that the discourses on lifelong learning promote a conception centred on the individual, instead of being a collective project. In this sense, the author refers that this subject has been transformed from a right, to a duty (Biesta, 2006), which has serious consequences for the way education and learning are viewed.

Other authors (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006; Coffield, 1999) also focus on the meaning of lifelong learning and how far it seems to be far from the philosophical ideals that founded it. This argument is still one of the main tensions that characterize the debates around lifelong learning: its use focused on a more economistic, and less humanistic, sense. Based on many reflections are the economic concerns that are moved by the importance of knowledge and skills for economic development. This perspective collides with a more humanistic one of education that establishes that the main purpose of development is the development of societies in a just and cohesive way, where people are the main source of wealth. The very same international organizations that popularized these concepts diverged with the meaning attributed to it, more economistic or more humanistic. Authors such as Kallen (1996), Lima (2002, 2003), Canário (2003, 2006) and Jarvis (2007) argue that it is the economic perspective that has gained greater relevance in policies around the world, favouring the accentuation of a utilitarian paradigm of education and its economic function.

This transformation in the idea of lifelong learning for Roldão (1996) is related to the changes in the structures and mechanisms of social functioning and to the changes in the role of the school in society, that have created a permanent need to reconvert and update the professional skills of individuals throughout life. As for school, its massification has made its traditional functions extrapolated and new functions are now required, which are not only about literacy skills but also about social skills and competencies, habits and values that help individuals to cope better with the accelerated dynamism and changes in everyday life.

In this perspective, the context of accelerated changes in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), where people and institutions need to be in permanent "recycling" to better manage and adapt their knowledge and skills, provides dilution of the boundaries between school and life in society. These scenarios lead individuals to be in constant updating and reconversion of skills and competences and bring serious consequences for education that transform, in the opinion of some authors, the true meaning of the educational process. One of these authors is Biesta (2005) who points out serious criticisms on the fact that the language of education has been replaced by the language of learning. Based on his argument Biesta states that during this replacement something very important has been lost and has to be reclaimed, so we need to reinvent the language of education. According to Biesta (2005), the education process became a set of economic transactions, where the learners are seen as consumers with specific needs that must be met by educational institutions. This type of criticism alerts to the fact that the use of lifelong learning may be creating an excessive weight in the need to accumulate learning, neglecting an important dimension of the educational process that goes beyond the mere achievement of skills and competences.

In this perspective, the educational process also integrates concerns, doubts, and risks that oblige the learner to face problems in different contexts and, therefore, to define himself as an individual in society. So, today's global context and, more precisely, the economic pressures led to this and other perversions of the real meaning of education, where the more pragmatist and technocratic perspectives subordinate lifelong learning only to a succession of skills and competences, forgetting, as Lima (2002) points out, the "substantivity of life".

Despite these criticisms, lifelong learning is ideologically intended to be a process that serves economic, social and personal purposes. This concept takes a holistic form that goes beyond the boundaries of time, space and context. The proponents of this critical view (Field, 2003; Aspin & Chapman, 2001) argue that this inclusive perspective of lifelong learning rejects the division between periods of schooling and post-schooling and that to promote and maximize opportunities for all to learn, it is important to increase the development of learning communities to meet the idea of a learning society.

Based on the studies of Aspin and Chapman (2001), in which, after a review of the different views on lifelong learning, we also reject the idea that a single definition of lifelong learning can be reached. As an alternative, these authors propose three elements as the essence core of lifelong learning and that encompass the main characteristics that this concept assumes both in politics, in practice, and the academic field. The three elements are framed for the purposes that are assigned to lifelong learning: i) to provide economic development and progress; ii) to provide personal development; iii) and to provide social inclusion and democratic participation and activity. From these three elements, the authors highlight the complexity of the interconnections and interdependencies that exist between them and the consequences they bring to education

The Role of Distance Education in Adult Learners Digital Literacies

Nowadays, digital literacies are considered to be part of the knowledge process. Though it's easy to believe those new generations and considered to be digital natives, born in technological environments used to interact with others and to perform daily activities, older generations are not as well prepared to explore digital and technological innovations. Nevertheless, adult learners need more access, at less cost, to learning processes and that need is changing scenarios and strategies for universities worldwide. The global, knowledge-based economy defies traditional universities to rethink their mission, purposes, structures, and programs, and in response, new organizations are emerging.

Digital literacy is considered to be, by most experts around the world, as one of the key competences for lifelong learning development and active citizenship participation in nowadays' societies. According to Jimoyiannis (2015), the main argument is that people who can understand and effectively use digital means are more likely to be empowered, take advantage of educational opportunities, and achieve success in many dimensions and activities of their social, economic and personal lives. But the conceptual framework around Digital Literacy is far from being consensual. This lack of consensus is thickened when the concept of digital competence is introduced. As Dias de Figueiredo (2019) states, there is an irresistible tendency to accentuate separations instead of valuing conscientiousness when new concepts emerge in the academic field, an inheritance that the author attributes to Cartesian thought. This tendency, according to the author, is verified when we use the "digital" qualifier to separate the digital activities of all the others, privileging technical visions of the digital competences that ignore the human and social dimension. For the author, digital literacy and skills are cultural, political and ethical phenomena that go far beyond the merely instrumental use and function. The main argument of Dias de Figueiredo (2019) is that competences and knowledge

should not be confused. They are both important but used in different situations and contexts. But there is no point in separating digital competences from other competencies that are not digital, because digital competences are cultural and complex, transversal and multidimensional (Dias de Figueiredo, 2019). As an example, the author refers to the digital reality where activities such as interaction and communication demand for skills and competences at the same time that traditional academic knowledge in specific domains is developed. This kind of scenario is very common in digital learning platforms, such as moodle, according to specific pedagogic models, such as the one used in the Portuguese Open University.

The Open University activity is guided by the Virtual Pedagogical Model (Pereira et al., 2007; Mendes et al., 2018), which is based on the following fundamental principles:

(i)   student-centred learning, which means that the student is active and responsible for building one's knowledge;
(ii)   learning based on the flexibility of access to learning (contents and activities), which means the absence of temporal or spatial imperatives. This principle embodies on the primacy of the asynchronous communication, which allows non-coincidence of space and non-coincidence of time, since communication and interaction are processed as it is convenient for the student, allowing the student time to read, process information, reflect, dialogue and interact;
(iii) learning is based on the diversified interaction between student-teacher, between student-student, and between student and content resources. This principle is embodied in various communication devices that the teacher plans and conceives according to the specific pedagogical strategy;
(iv)   learning as a promoter of digital inclusion, understood as the facilitation of the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), as well as the development of skills and competences for the analysis and production of digital information.

In this model the student is integrated into a learning community that has permanent access to open educational resources, learning objects, e-activities, debates, and sharing of experiences. Throughout the course, students will have the opportunity to experiment with various tools and web interfaces that will allow them, to not only achieve disciplinary knowledge but also acquire and experiment sociocultural skills and competences to use ICT, interact and communicate with others.

This pedagogical model of the Portuguese Open University is close to the idea of Digital Literacy proposed by Jimoyiannis (2015) who defines multiple aspects of digital literacy and presents an operational framework addressing the various skills, competencies, and attitudes determining digital literacy for adult learners. The author states that the multiplicity of literacy practices has led to a new term, multiliteracies, which emphasizes the different ways and tools used by people today for written, visual and multimodal information and communications practices. In this sense, Jimoyiannis (2015) states that Digital Literacy reflects a wide range of skills, competences, knowledge, and attitudes about the use of ICT to achieve goals related to personal and social development and employment. In his own words "It is a broad concept reflecting the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use ICT tools I the context of specific life, work and learning situations" (Jimoyiannis, 2015, p. 4).

Even though digital literacy is a concept surrounded by different interpretations and perspectives it is usually associated with other concepts equally used with different meanings according to different contexts. Since its first use by Glister (1997) digital literacy has been overused and has come to assume a variety of designs and meanings as a result of recent scientific, technological and digital innovations (Aires et al., 2019). Following this assumption, the authors conclude that, although there

is already some literature that demonstrates that this concept is used in different perspectives, its analysis has not been done in an integrative way. For the authors, digital literacy presents a socio-cultural dimension that must be analysed as an evolutionary process, not reducing itself to the effective capacity of the use of digital resources. Regardless of the lack of integration of perspectives on this concept, we share the idea of Aires et al. (2019) when they say that considering that this conceptual model is still in development, the contribution of digital literacies should be seen in a holistic and lifelong human development perspective.

But what do the education graduates from a Distance Education university perceive? What impacts did they feel on a personal, social and professional level?

Adult learners in Distance Education: results from a survey about the impacts of a higher education experience

The following part of this article intends to explore the perceptions that adult students that attended an education course at the open university in Portugal have on the impacts of this course at a personal, social and economic (professional) level.

Data, methods, and survey

As previously mentioned, the data presented and analysed in this article is the result of a questionnaire survey developed within the Observatory of Professional and Life Paths of Graduates of the Open Portuguese University (UAb). This questionnaire was prepared in 2015 and had slight adjustments (which do not compromise the comparability of the data between different collection moments) in 2017. The questionnaire consists of questions grouped into five large blocks, reflecting the dimensions that were intended to be analysed:

   (i)   the profile of the graduates, including social origins, area of residence and educational and professional curriculum, before the course;
   (ii) the course in the Open University, the reasons and modalities of entry, the duration of its ac-complishment, the professional situation throughout the course and the conditions in which the students carried out the degree;
   (iii) the balance of competences and relations, including the representations of the respond-ents about the competences, developed and the relations established during the graduation course;
   (iv) the perceived impact of the academic degree, not only on working conditions and trajectories but also on family, cultural and civic life;
   (v)   and future projects, including needs and interests of higher education and lifelong learning.

This questionnaire was applied to all individuals who completed their degree in Education from UAb between 2011 and 2015, in two phases: i) the first phase of data gathering took place between July and October 2015 and was addressed to all those who had completed their degree in 2011, 2012 or 2013. Of the 272 education graduates in these three years, 77 (28.3%) answered; ii) the second phase of the data gathering took place during the month of May 2017 and was addressed to all those who had completed their degree in 2014 or 2015. Of the 162 graduates in this biennium, 66 (40.7%) answered. The definition of this time interval was considered time enough to allow the identification by graduate students of the impacts of the degree in their life –at least 2 years after the conclusion of the degree.

The questionnaire was sent online using the LIME Survey platform, made available from a link that reached the graduate students from their email address.

It should be noticed that the following analysis deals with the data as a whole, thus fulfilling the anonymity commitment of the respondents.

Findings

Between 2011 and 2015, 434 students graduated in Education in the Portuguese Open University, however, only 143 graduates answered this questionnaire, and 72% of those respondents are female. The high rate of feminization confirms a broader tendency in Europe where more and more women attend higher education courses (Alves & Lopes, 2015) and, in particular, the courses related to educational dimensions (Prá & Cegatti, 2016). In addition to the majority of respondents being women, the average age is 45 years and about half of the respondents resided during the graduation course in areas with higher population density.

The survey intended to identify data on the work condition of the family of the students. When questioned about the occupational professions of the parents, more than 40% of the respondents said that the nuclear family of origin has (or had) industrial occupations (father) and rural activities (mothers), that is, occupations that require low levels of schooling. The professional occupations of the parents is an important element for the characterization of the social origin of the respondents, which reinforces the notion that the graduates in Education of the Portuguese Open University are non-traditional students in paths of upward social mobility. This movement accompany, to some extent, the transformations of the country in the last decades concerning schooling and sectors of professional activity.

What were de professional occupations and academic experiences of the students before and after the graduation in Education?

Regarding the professional activity of the graduates in Education, they were asked about two moments: before the beginning of the course and after the course is completed. Before graduation, 32% of the students performed administrative and similar functions, followed by the functions related to the services and sales sector. After completing the course, we noticed a slight increase in the number of graduates who were in academic and scientific professions and technical jobs. In similar reducing the number of graduates engaged in professions associated with administrative and similar occupations related to services and sales (Figure 1).
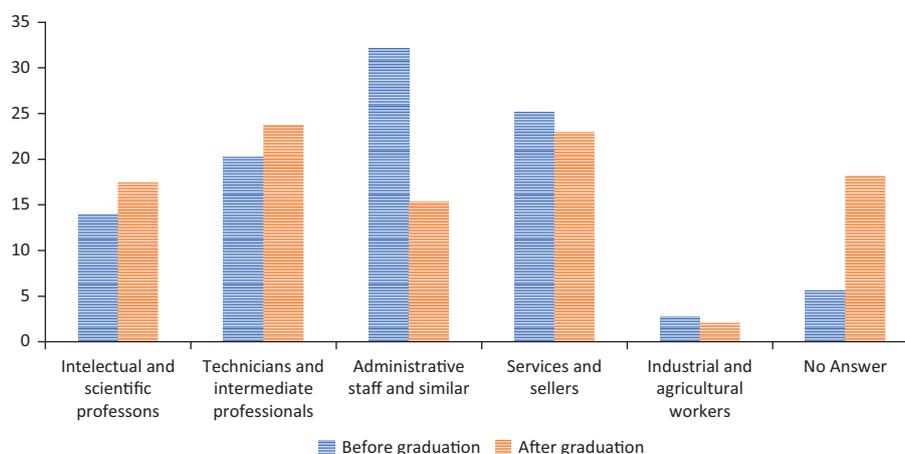

Figure 1: Professional activity before and after graduation.

Another interesting indicator relates to the employment situation before and after graduation (Figure 2). The overwhelming majority of the students in the Education course (almost 90%) were working full time during the course, although only 58% had applied for student worker status. This trend confirms the general profile of students at the Open University, which corresponds to students that are already established in the labour market. These students are normally individuals who have been away from the educational system for several years, including workers, adults, and students representing the first generation of their family to attend higher education (Fragoso, 2016).

Concerning the legal regime of the organizations in which they work, about half of the respondents report being employed (76.2%), of which 52.4% are in the public sector and close to 24% in the private sector. As self-employed workers, there are around 6.3%.
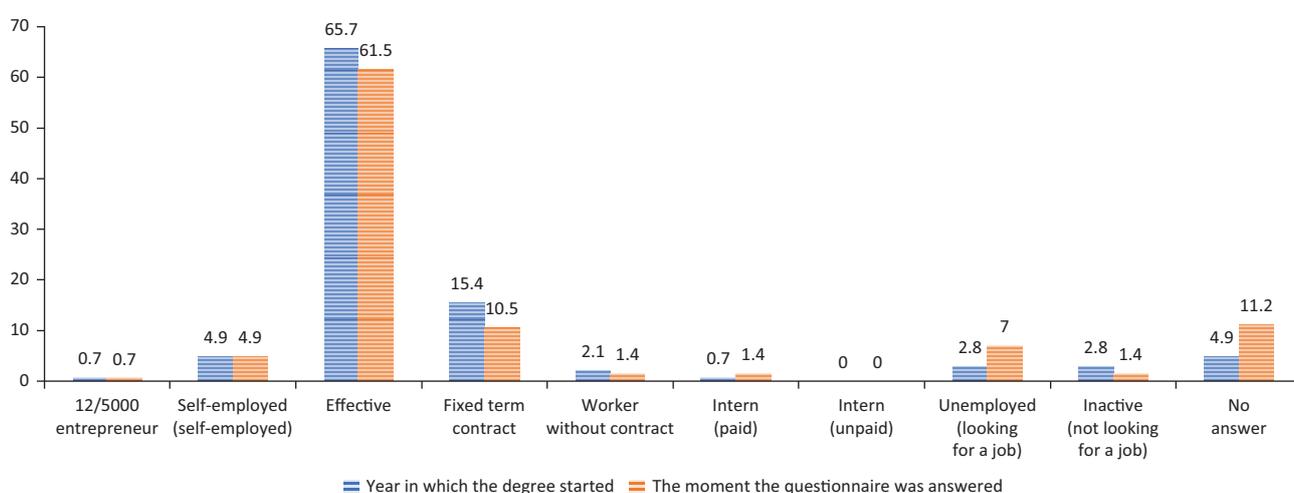

Figure 2: Work situation before and after graduation.

For the school pathways, the data indicate that at the moment of admission to the Open University almost 70% of the graduates in Education held a Secondary level of Education; almost 10% had technical or vocational training; only 8.4% already had a higher education degree. Looking in detail at the previous experience of higher education held by the education graduates, the responses revealed that 65% of graduates had never had any type of experience in Higher Education and that about 15% had already started another course at this level of education without having finished it. On a residual basis, about 7% of the graduates were holders of another higher education degree in another institution.

What was it like to experience an online degree in education?

Regarding the length of the course, the reasons that led to its conclusion and the greatest difficulties experienced, students' responses showed that the vast majority completed the course within the expected time (84%). The reasons for that (Figure 3) were the personal strength (76.8%), the interest of the contents of the course (49.7%), the support of the family (41.9%) and the flexibility that the pedagogical model allows (35.7%). Other reasons were mentioned but with less emphasis such as colleagues (22.4% of the answers), teachers (16.8% of the answers) and less importantly the employer's support (5.6%).
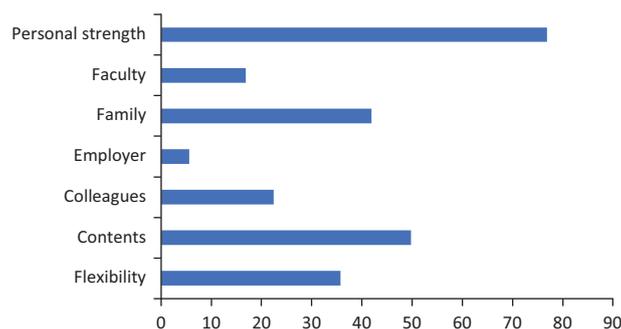
Figure 3: Reasons for having successfully completed the degree.

When questioned about the main reasons that made it difficult to conduct the course, respondents highlighted as main obstacles professional and civic activities, family activities and personal issues, among others with residual expressions, considering the variety of answers obtained. It should be noted that no one showed as difficulties the lack of interest in the course, the difficult and inadequate contents, the use of the online learning platform and the relationship with colleagues, and thus all these aspects are considered positive aspects of the degree. Other reasons were pointed out for the difficulty to complete the degree in the time they had predicted: a short time available for the study activities, financial difficulties, and pregnancy or other health issues.

The most important were: study with flexibility and autonomy (71%) and the possibility of studying without major dislocations (73%). Other reasons were also considered important in choosing the course such as deepening knowledge and culture (57%); achieve favourable working position/ condition (53%); and eLearning (54%).

When questioned about whether the learning performed in the course corresponded to the initial expectations, 93.7% indicated that yes, with 2.1% saying no.

Table 1: Student satisfaction regarding the degree in Education

Satisfaction with...		Frequency %
Study plan and contents	Not at all satisfied	0
	Not very satisfied	1,4
	Satisfied	51,7
	Very satisfied	37,1
	No answer	9,8
Learning outcomes	Not at all satisfied	0
	Not very satisfied	7
	Satisfied	46,1
	Very satisfied	36,4
	No answer	10,5

Continued

Table 1: Continued

Satisfaction with...		Frequency %
Interaction with professors	Not at all satisfied	1,4
	Not very satisfied	12,6
	Satisfied	48,9
	Very satisfied	25,9
	No answer	11,2
Administrative services	Not at all satisfied	1,4
	Not very satisfied	11,9
	Satisfied	57,3
	Very satisfied	19,6
	No answer	9,8
Colleagues	Not at all satisfied	0
	Not very satisfied	5,6
	Satisfied	49,6
	Very satisfied	32,9
	No answer	11,9
Training activities and assessment	Not at all satisfied	0
	Not very satisfied	4,2
	Satisfied	47,5
	Very satisfied	34,3
	No answer	14
Exams	Not at all satisfied	0
	Not very satisfied	2,8
	Satisfied	55,9
	Very satisfied	27,3
	No answer	14

The students were also asked about their attendance in the degree course in Education and we analyse their level of agreement regarding a set of dimensions to which they were confronted during the course. Graduates indicated the comfort with the use of the online platform with the highest levels of agreement (78.3% agree). Soon after, we have the fact that online education is an excellent means of learning. These two indicators reinforce the advantages that students recognize in distance education. Almost 60% of respondents fully agree that this mode of teaching and learning provides a sense of belonging to a community, and 55% say they are totally at ease in interacting with peers and teachers. Half the respondents are in complete agreement that they have established friendly ties with colleagues and teachers. Even though there is an absence of answers

that indicate a total disagreement with these dimensions, we point out that 37% of the students still do not fully agree with the fact that they can establish friendships with colleagues and teachers in the online platform.

After graduation, what were the impacts of the online degree?

Regarding the competences and skills developed during the degree in Education, the respondents showed that those that were more developed were the capacity of analysis and synthesis, as well as the autonomy, culture and critical sense. The responses also highlighted the fact that the students believe to have deepened knowledge and foundations on the field of study and professional, communication and technological skills and ability to work in groups.

   In terms of the impacts of the degree professionally, socially and personally, we verified by the data analysis that the respondents stated that it was at the social and individual level that they felt the greatest impacts of the degree. This finding comes from the reading of the highest percentages that we observed in Table 2, where they emphasize: feeling to have more critical capacity, planning and innovation ability; being an informed and participative citizen; having the possibility to extend cultural practices and provide enlightened support to family members. In terms of professional impacts, we emphasize that no significant response rates are demonstrating that the degree has helped to exploit employment opportunities, although it has contributed to the development of professional work methods. The respondents also consider that it did not contribute significantly to career progression, although the importance given to the problem-solving capacity acquired during the course is clear.

Table 2: Preparation of the Degree in Education for professional life

Preparation of the Degree in Education for professional life		Frequency %
Explore job opportunities	Nothing	7
	Little	28
	Quite	28
	Much	11,9
	No answer	25,1
Methods of professional work	Nothing	2,8
	Little	20,3
	Quite	35,6
	Much	17,5
	No answer	23,8
Interacting and solving problems	Nothing	0,7
	Little	7,7
	Quite	49,6
	Much	21
	No answer	21

Continued

Table 2: Continued

Preparation of the Degree in Education for professional life		Frequency %
Career Development	Nothing	41,2
	Little	14,7
	Quite	7,7
	Much	14
	No answer	22,4
Technology use	Nothing	6,3
	Little	2,3
	Quite	30,8
	Much	21
	No answer	19,6
Network of professional contacts	Nothing	21
	Little	28
	Quite	20,2
	Much	9,8
	No answer	21
Critical capacity, planning and innovation	Nothing	4,2
	Little	6,3
	Quite	39,1
	Much	32,9
	No answer	17,5
Informed and participative citizen	Nothing	0
	Little	4,2
	Quite	45,4
	Much	38,5
	No answer	11,9
Extend cultural and leisure practices	Nothing	2,1
	Little	19,6
	Quite	41,2
	Much	23,1
	No answer	14

Table 2: Continued

Preparation of the Degree in Education for professional life		Frequency %
Informed family support	Nothing	0
	Little	9,8
	Quite	42
	Much	33,5
	No answer	14,7
Extended social networks	Nothing	1,4
	Little	29,4
	Quite	34,2
	Much	21
	No answer	14
Feeling better and more capable	Nothing	0
	Little	0,7
	Quite	26,6
	Much	60,1
	No answer	12,6

It should be noted that the current Portuguese scenario of the professional integration of graduates is characterized by a general framework of structural unemployment, as a result of the economic crisis that began in 2008. The precariousness and freezing of career progressions are striking features of the Portuguese labour market, which increases the number of precarious and low-paid jobs.

Nevertheless, confronting respondents with the adequacy of the degree to the professional activity they perform, a quarter of the answers refer to the course as fundamental to their professional activity and almost 40% as very useful. 14% of the students report that the degree was irrelevant to professional activity. These data are in apparent disagreement with the fact that a large part of the respondents considered that the degree in Education had little impact on their professional progression. It is thus possible that graduates have chosen this course because they already carry out activities related to the field of education before attending it, or that they have found other ways in their professional activity to put into practice the learning experiences they have done during the course.

In terms of the impacts of the degree course at the professional level, it is also significant that about 63% of the respondents say that the course did not provide any change in the category or professional activity, which coincides with the data discussed above that pointed the usefulness of the degree in the context of professional progression. However, 28% say they have had positive impacts at professional level.

It was important to determine whether these changes in the professional category or professional activity were due to factors related to the qualifications, skills, teachers or colleagues. The data revealed that the determining factors for these professional changes were the qualifications (19.6%) and the acquired competencies (19.6%).

The degree did not represent a decisive stimulus for the opening of companies or economic activities on their own since only 4.9% of the respondents answered that they had opened their own business or activity. Still, for these, factors such as acquired competences, best qualifications, as well as teachers and colleagues were determinant.

For more than half of the graduates, the degree in education did not make a significant contribution either to improving working conditions (65.7%), to professional stability (82.5%) or to the development of more rewarding work activities (61.5%) (Table 3).

Table 3: Contributions of the degree in labour terms

In terms of work, the Degree in Education contributed		Frequency %
Improvement of working position / conditions	In the organization where I already worked	24,5
	In another org where I started working	7,7
	On my own	2,1
	No answer	65,7
Labour stability	In the organization where I already worked	13,3
	In another org where I started working	3,5
	On my own	0,7
	No answer	82,5
Rewarding work activities	In the organization where I already worked	28
	In another org where I started working	7
	On my own	3,5
	No answer	61,5

The participation in professional associations was another dimension analysed in this survey. Revealing that associative movements are not yet a culturally rooted reality since almost 75% of the respondents say they do not participate in any professional association. Residually, about 5% say they have started to participate in this type of association, but not because of the influence of the teachers or classmates. Under these conditions, only 1.4% stated that they started to integrate professional associations.

After graduation, did the students continue to study and attend other courses?

When asked whether they enrolled in another course after completing the degree, 63.4% reported that they are not enrolled in any course. Only 23.8% say they have already enrolled in courses and of these, only 7.7% are enrolled in Open University' courses. However, when asked whether they would have the same options regarding the choice of course and institution (Figure 4), 67% stated that they would choose the same course at the same University, that is, a degree in Education at the Open University. Almost 15% would choose another course at the Open University and only 1.4% said they would choose another university, which indicates a high level of satisfaction not only with the degree in Education but also with the Open University.
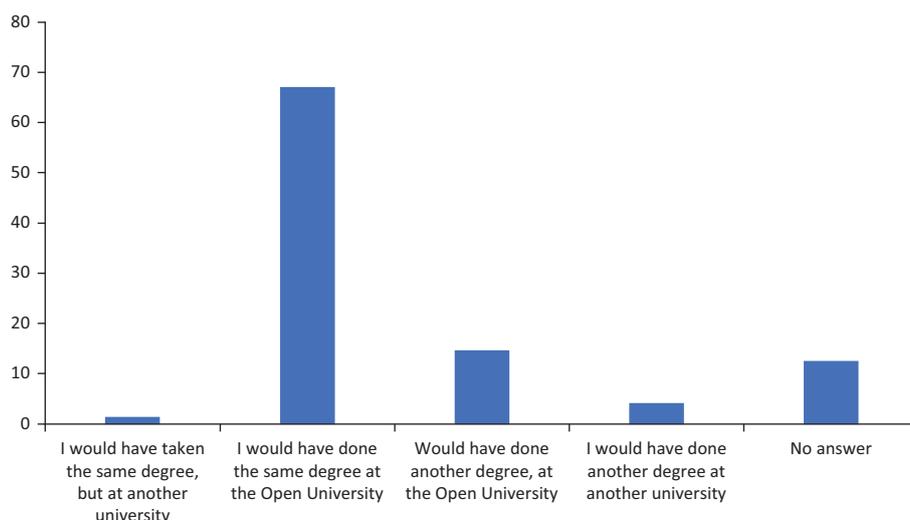
Figure 4: If I went back.

What about expectations for the near future?

Professional expectations for the next three years were one of the in-depth dimensions in this survey (Figure 5). Faced with a set of possibilities, about 44% of the respondents said they expected being promoted and/or changing their position within the organization in which they work. On the contrary, those who expect to stay in the current situation or entering retirement represent 17.5% of the answers to this question.
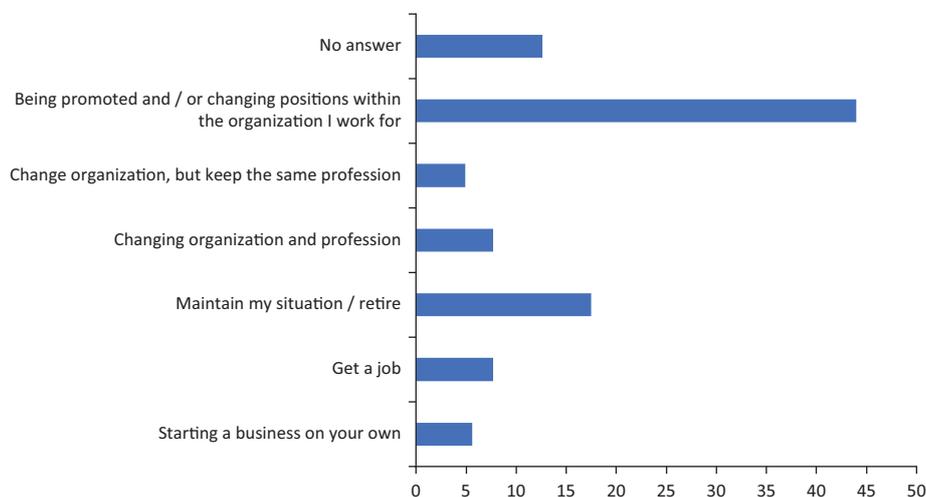

Figure 5: Projects / professional expectations for 3 years.

Regarding future training projects and expectations, we found that 49% of the respondents indicated that they wanted to continue their studies at a postgraduate, master's or doctoral level and that 35.7% would continue to study participating in short term training actions. Only 10.5% reported that they do not expect to continue to study or participate in training actions. Of all the affirmative answers regarding the continuation of the studies, 69.2% indicate that, if there is an interesting educational offer, they will choose the Portuguese Open University to continue studying.

In conclusion, when asked about the characteristics of a graduate student in Portuguese Open University, the respondents advanced a set of qualifiers and adjectives that were the subject of documentary analysis and can be synthesized the following way: responsible, organized, persistent, motivated, resilient, disciplined, interested, hardworking, dedicated, dynamic. We highlight aspects related to the self-regulation capacity of their learning, but also aspects that call for a collaborative dimension.

Final Discussion

In 2006, Gert Biesta asked the following question: what is the point of lifelong learning if lifelong learning has no point? In this article, we reclaim the point of lifelong learning in a digital society where men and women have to develop skills to undertake their life projects in a personal, social and professional way. We emphasize the meaning of lifelong learning to ensure the development of each person's life project to be prepared for the unpredictability of life, without forgetting the "substantivity" of life as defended by Lima (2002).

According to the data presented, lifelong learning has a point if we acknowledge this concept as a three-dimensional model that may provide economic development and progress, personal development and social inclusion and democratic participation and activity. Data also shows that graduate students from Portuguese Open University recognize digital means as a form of personal empowerment that allows them to take advantage of educational opportunities and more flexibly and adaptively, such as distance education. Without separating digital competences from other competencies, they also recognize the importance and relevance of competences and abilities such as communication, interaction, cooperation, etc. In conclusion, we propose an approach to distance higher education that reclaims the humanistic and multidimensional value of lifelong learning, using digital learning platforms based on flexibility and adaptability, as a way of developing not only digital competences but also transversal competences in all contexts of life with significant personal, social and professional impact.

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