

The clients and functions of Spanish university programmes for older people: a sociological analysis

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ABSTRACT

‘University programmes for older people’ (UPOP) have recently expanded rapidly in Europe and are now well established. This study examines the functions and achievements of the programmes and the characteristics of UPOP students in Spain. The evaluation is from a general sociological perspective, and uses data from a survey of a representative sample of the students and other sources. The main socio-demographic findings are that the students are relatively young older people, have a relatively high socio-economic level, and are predominantly women and retired. It is shown that beyond the education imparted, the programmes also fulfil important social roles. A critical analysis of the programmes as social policy highlights their socially selective reach and impacts, and compares their actual and potential functions. Some alternatives are discussed. If UPOP are to maintain their identity as programmes for older people, a different approach is required to reach all elderly people, including the ‘really old’. On the other hand, if the objectives emphasise the promotion of social integration and personal development (in matters other than employment skills), there is no reason why they should be addressed exclusively to people aged 50 or more years (or any arbitrary age). Rather, they should be open to adults of all ages. If this change were made, UPOP would give less reinforcement to a particular social construction of old age.

KEY WORDS – university programmes, life-long learning, older people, old-age policies, Spain.

Introduction

‘University programmes for older people’ (UPOP) include various university courses designed for older people with certain shared attributes (Alfageme and Cabedo 2005). They are educational programmes with

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varying degrees of university involvement, although most are courses designed and taught by university staff; and their aims emphasise the promotion of personal fulfilment and raising the social integration and quality of life of older people. In effect, they are socio-educational intervention programmes for older people (generally defined as people aged at least 50 or 55 years), and consequently are not concerned with vocational training or job skills. They do not practise competitive selection for admission, none of the qualifications usually necessary for university admission are required, and lenient assessment systems procedures are normally used, such as class attendance. The complement is that UPOP do not have the same status as mainstream university courses.

Since the pioneer programmes in 1973 in Toulouse, France, university programmes for older people have proliferated across Europe (Lemieux 1997; Velázquez and Fernández 1998; Sánchez Martínez 1999; Yenerall 2003; Orte, Ballester and Touza 2004). Population ageing and the rising educational level of those reaching old age go some way to explain this phenomenon. UPOP have taken different forms in different places, which suggests that no single criterion makes for a viable course or best matches the students' or society's demands. From their beginnings, a typology emerged that with some variations remains today. The first model, discussed in this paper, is of courses developed under the direction of conventional universities as an extension of their educational role (or community service) – in this paper, it is termed the *formal model*, and refers to programmes designed and developed by universities, and generally structured by established academic subjects. This appears to be the most widespread form in most West European countries, particularly in France, Italy, Germany and Spain.

A second, less formal model has also become well established. It originated in Great Britain during the 1980s, and was essentially developed by the initiatives of older people themselves, typically taking the form of discussion and study groups, which quickly became generally known as Universities of the Third Age (U3A), associations that are totally independent of formal universities. They embody a long tradition of voluntary association and mutual help. In February 2006, 574 local groups with a total membership of 153,443 were affiliated to the national representative charitable organisation, *The Third Age Trust* (see <http://www.u3a.org.uk/>). Non-formal associations are more widespread in North America than in Europe.

The growth of UPOP in Spain began in the 1990s, above all through formal programmes organised and developed by universities. The first national meeting of UPOP course managers took place in Granada in 1996, since when annual meetings have been held (Guirao and Sánchez

Martínez 1998). The main issues of debate have been the need for university institutions definitively and explicitly to accept the responsibility for older adult education. At the same time, and not without difficulties, a particular pattern of the programmes has taken shape, one that is essentially of near-conventional university courses in selected subject areas, which typically lean heavily on the human sciences, followed by subjects related to health and new information and communications technologies. The main variations in programme structure are in the degree of permitted choice in the selection of subjects and courses. Today, the vast majority of Spanish public universities, and many private universities too, offer an educational programme for older people, and approximately 30,000 older people are enrolled. The expansion has been a remarkable social phenomenon.

A sociological evaluation of UPOP

This paper examines university courses for older people from a sociological perspective, that is, in the wider contexts of the social situation of older people, and by appraising the aims and outcomes of UPOP as *de facto* social policy (Alfageme, Cabedo and Escuder 2003). The sociology of ageing presents various pertinent theoretical approaches by which to analyse policies about and for older people. They concern the contrast between, on one hand, the functionalist view of a passive old age disengaged from the world, and on the other, the critical gerontologist's censure of the social construction of old age and of the structured dependence of older people. The functionalist perspective, which derived from the theory of social disengagement (Cumming and Henry 1961), advanced the normative view that old age is a time for passivity and withdrawal from productive roles. This is now giving way to a more diffuse view of old age as a life-cycle stage that remains ill defined but does not have to be passive, involves leisure and self-realisation as well as family engagement, and is certainly different from younger life-cycle stages in important respects. The changed normative view explains the development of a set of policies specifically for older people that accompany the spread of compulsory retirement; they include education programmes primarily or exclusively for older people.

Dialectic or critical perspectives on society and formal or *de facto* social policies provide a contrasting view of old age and different evaluations of 'ageing policies'. Since the early 1980s, the theory of 'structured dependency' of older people in Europe (Townsend 1981), and the 'political economy of ageing' in North America (Minkler and Estes 1984), have

seriously questioned the inevitability of social disengagement in old age. Social disengagement may arise from the institution of retirement, from the cultural expectations of activity limitation, and from a rising risk of illness or disability. Cohort or generational approaches to the understanding of older people's social situation, which focus on the social conditions in which the members of each cohort have lived and currently exist, emphasise the social and historical inequalities among successive cohorts, while the critical approach highlights intra-generational inequalities arising from factors related to social class, socio-economic conditions, gender and ethnicity (Alfageme 1999). Critical approaches purport that policies, rather than focusing on one age group, should aim to guarantee equality of opportunities at any age. Universities could offer to adults of any age programmes that are similar to UPOP, in that they emphasise equal opportunities to all regardless of gender, social class, ethnicity, living situations and age-related inequalities. Publicity and marketing campaigns and flexible timetables would play an important role in this task, and such provision would be in line with advocacy for life-long learning (European Commission 2001).

The recent developments in education for older people have had implications for theory in the field of educational gerontology. Among the main issues for debate has been the pertinence of specific educational models for older people, a question that remains unresolved. Advances in educational gerontology owe much to the development of a critical educational gerontology (Cusak 1999; Glendenning 2000; Formosa 2002). As has often been the case, critical positions test questions that are frequently taken for granted. They show, for instance, that not all educational programmes for older people fulfil a truly emancipating function, that many of the programmes reproduce rather than prevent social inequalities, and that certain underlying interests, as of the controlling agencies, quite probably have little or no connection with the interests of older people. The basic question lies in the choice of the socio-educational paradigm on which the educational programme is constructed. Should courses for older people be distinctly critical, dialectic, emancipating or relevant to older people's situation? (Sáez Carreras 2005).

Despite the frequent absence of any theoretical (or indeed needs-based) grounding or of defined objectives, the provision of formal educational programmes for older people has become a reality in Spain and in much of Europe. The phenomenon requires critical and constructive appraisal. It is notable, for example, that universities do not usually involve or consult older people when they design their programmes. The risk therefore arises that new university programmes for older people operate as

consumer commodities, with similar effects to those of printed and televised entertainments for older people that tend to represent and reinforce social inequalities and stereotypical social constructions of old age (Kessler, Rakoczy and Staudinger 2004). Of course, universities do not offer mere entertainment, but access to knowledge and training in analytical capacities, which invites closer scrutiny.

Methodology

The analyses reported in this paper were part of a larger project on the growth of UPOP in Spain (see the Acknowledgements). The principal data collection method was a questionnaire survey of a representative national sample of UPOP students. The questionnaire design and the included topics were informed by the objectives and the theoretical framework of the project, by the research team's previous experience and knowledge of UPOP, and by a series of open-ended exploratory interviews with the students.¹ A pilot questionnaire was administered with UPOP students in Castellón, the results of which led to minor revisions to the questionnaire.

The sampling procedure began by compiling the principal characteristics of the 50 Spanish universities that offer UPOP, partly through telephone inquiries. From this list, a selection of 20 universities was made using two inclusion criteria: first, proportionality in terms of organisational aspects, mainly to whom the programmes were aimed, those aged over 55 years (65 %) or aged over 50 years or less (35 %); and secondly, to represent the various Spanish regions. The practicalities of accessibility were also a consideration (universities are localised in the largest cities, and the sample included institutions in 16 cities in nine Autonomous Regions). The directors of the selected programmes were contacted by telephone to explain the project, secure their collaboration, and to arrange the dates on which UPOP classes could be visited. At these visits, the purpose of the survey was explained to the students, their participation invited, and the self-completion questionnaires were distributed. In this way, information was collected for both course groups and individual students.

The research team proceeded by several routes through the various autonomous regions, and the fieldwork was carried out during March, April and May 2005. Altogether, 1,448 completed questionnaires were returned. The results may be considered as representative of the universe studied (Spanish UPOP students).² The response rates to the questionnaire were very satisfactory (near 100%). Nevertheless, the fact that

TABLE I. *Age and sex of the general population aged 55+ years and of UPOP students aged 55+ years in Spain, 2005*

Age group (years)	Spanish population			UPOP student sample		
	Men	Women	Both sexes	Men	Women	Both sexes
55–59	10.2	10.6	20.8	8.8	17.8	26.6
60–64	8.7	9.3	18.0	10.4	19.5	29.9
65–69	7.3	8.3	15.6	7.5	13.6	21.1
70–74	7.5	9.0	16.5	5.1	7.8	12.9
75–79	5.6	7.6	13.2	2.9	4.9	7.8
80–84	3.4	5.7	9.1	0.7	0.6	1.3
85 and over	2.0	4.8	6.8	0.1	0.3	0.4
55 and over	44.7	55.3	100.0	35.5	64.5	100.0

Notes: The Spanish population aged 55+ years in 2005 was 11,963,566. The survey sample size in the tabulated age groups was 1,199.

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), *Avance del Padrón*, 1 January 2005.

the questionnaires were self-administered had a drawback. Despite our efforts at the design stage and in the pilot trials, the questions were not always interpreted as expected, and some questions produced low response rates (see Table 4, notes 6 and 7). Finally it is possible that those who completed the questionnaires over-represented those who were more satisfied with the courses, perhaps because they were more likely to be present in the class when we visited.

The characteristics of UPOP students

We now compare the socio-demographic characteristics of the UPOP student sample with the characteristics of the Spanish population aged 55 or more years, the age group to which the programmes are primarily aimed. The UPOP student data derive from our questionnaire, administered in 2005. The data on the general Spanish elderly population are from the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (INE) or the *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (CIS), depending on their suitability for each variable.³

Sex and age

Table 1 shows that women were strongly over-represented among the UPOP students, for they comprised 64.5 per cent of the total compared to 55.3 per cent of the general Spanish population aged 55 or more years. A high female presence characterised all age groups. With regard to age, the

UPOP clientele was relatively 'young', with 77.6 per cent aged under 70 years, compared to 54.4 per cent of the general population aged 55 or more years. Interestingly, however, there were fewer aged 55–59 years than aged 60–64 years, which surely reflects the decreased participation in paid work in the latter age group. At the oldest ages, 15.9 per cent of the Spanish elderly population are aged 80 or more years, but their presence among UPOP students was practically insignificant (1.7% of the total). The relatively young and female profile of the UPOP student population can be clearly appreciated. It should be noted that women's longer life expectancy does not explain their high representation among UPOP students. The female-to-male ratio did not increase with age, as in the general elderly population.

Marital status and living arrangements

Given the relatively young age distribution of UPOP students, it might be expected that there would be a relatively low percentage of widowed men and women, but this was not the case, and the actual percentages replicated those in the general elderly population (around 30%) (Table 2). Among those aged 55–64 years, widowed people were over-represented (12.4% of UPOP students, compared with 7.9% in the general population). The married percentage of UPOP students, although the largest category in all age groups, was relatively low compared to the general population, while widowed, single, separated and divorced people were over-represented among both the 55–64 and 65+ years age-groups. Turning to the students' living arrangements (but referring exclusively to those aged 65 or more years), a remarkably high proportion lived alone (30.6% compared to 14.2% in the general population), which is consistent with the relatively high number of single, widowed and separated people. The living arrangements reflect the relatively young age structure of the UPOP students, and the associated low proportion with physical or cognitive disabilities and dependencies: relatively few lived in the homes of one of their sons or daughters (Table 2). At least two conclusions can be drawn. First, a relatively high proportion of UPOP students had probably enrolled on the programmes for some reason associated with living alone (*e.g.* to make contact with other people, or to fill spare time). Secondly, very few people with serious health or functioning problems (many of whom are likely to be dependent on the care of others) were enrolled on UPOP courses.

We now compare the percentages of UPOP students and of the Spanish elderly population aged over 55 years who lived alone, differentiating by gender. Some interesting differentials were found. The

TABLE 2. *Socio-demographic characteristics of the general population aged 55+ years and of UPOP students aged 55+ years by age-groups, Spain*

Attribute and category	UPOP students		Spanish population	
	55–64 yrs	65+ yrs	55–64 yrs	65+ yrs
Marital status¹	<i>Percentages</i>			
Married	68.4	55.0	80.1	59.7
Single	10.6	10.7	8.1	8.0
Widowed	12.4	30.5	7.9	30.9
Separated/divorced	8.7	3.8	3.9	1.4
Sample size	(680)	(522)	(4.04 m.)	(6.80 m.)
Living arrangement²				
Alone	–	30.6	–	14.2
With their partner only	–	39.2	–	41.3
With their partner and children	–	15.6	–	15.5
Without partner, with a child, in their own home	–	7.4	–	12.6
Without partner in the home of a child	–	1.9	–	7.6
Other situation	–	5.3	–	8.7
Sample size	–	(513)	–	(2.43 m.)
Previous education³				
Illiterate	0.0	0.0	2.3	6.7
Can read and write, no schooling	0.0	1.1	9.2	16.4
Fewer than 5 years at school	0.7	2.8	7.6	10.2
Primary education completed	15.1	22.0	40.6	49.0
First level baccalaureate ⁴	28.7	28.2	19.1	7.4
Higher level baccalaureate ⁵	24.0	20.5	8.9	3.9
University diploma	24.2	15.1	4.3	3.7
University degree	7.1	9.8	7.3	2.3
Postgraduate degree	0.3	0.4	0.7	0.4
Sample size	(637)	(468)	(303)	(511)
Monthly household income (Euros)⁶				
Below 301	0.9	2.8	2.3	1.6
301–600	3.2	13.2	11.2	39.0
601–900	7.8	9.7	19.6	27.9
901–1,200	15.0	13.0	23.8	13.3
1,201–1,800	21.7	26.9	19.6	10.0
1,801–2,400	16.9	16.4	7.9	5.1
2,401–3,000	14.7	7.9	5.6	1.9
3,001–4,500	11.4	6.3	7.0	0.8
4,501–6,000	3.4	1.9	1.9	0.3
Over 6,000	4.9	2.1	0.9	0.0
Sample size	(586)	(432)	(214)	(369)

Notes: 1. INE, *Censo de Población y Viviendas 2001*. 2. Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), *Study of the Loneliness of Older People aged 65 or More Years*, Study 2279, February–March 1998. The UPOP data are for students aged 65 or more years old. 3. CIS, Study 2594, February 2005. 4. Professional training-1. 5. Professional training-2. 6. CIS, Study 2584, December 2004. This was the most recent available CIS household income data.

percentage of men who lived alone was slightly lower amongst UPOP students than in the general population (8.7% and 9.5% respectively), while among women, the percentage was much higher (30.7% compared

to 20.3%) (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2001). Living alone increased the probability of enrolment on UPOP only for women. This gender differential is one of the issues that require most attention from several perspectives and by the universities.

Education, training and monthly income

Amongst the various socio-demographic attributes of the UPOP students, the level of education was most instructive (Table 2). As in the general Spanish older population, a clear cohort effect on the level of education is discernible, which reflects the expansion and democratisation of school education in recent Spanish history: on average, the older the person, the less the formal education that he or she had received. For this reason, and to facilitate comparisons, educational level is presented by two age groups. The age relationship is much less evident among the UPOP students than in the general population. The very clear finding is that the UPOP students had a higher level of education compared to the general population of the same ages. Very few UPOP students had received no schooling or had failed to finish primary education (fewer than five years at school). Most UPOP students had been educated to first or higher baccalaureate level (secondary education), and many had university qualifications (particularly diplomas). Amongst the general elderly population in 2005, by contrast, the modal educational category was 'completed primary education', and substantial proportions were illiterate or had no or very few years at school, and few had higher education qualifications.

The socio-demographic characteristics analysed in this study are clearly inter-related, perhaps most so among those that are now examined. It is widely understood of contemporary western societies that a person's socio-economic characteristics or, if preferred, social stratum or class, manifest themselves in correlated social, income and occupational attributes. The questionnaire included a question on the overall monthly income of the student's household (Table 2). As with educational level, a cohort effect was stronger in the general population than amongst UPOP students, who enjoyed appreciably higher and less variable incomes. The modal and majority income category was €901–2,400. In contrast, over 60 per cent of all Spanish 55–64 year-olds in December 2004 had a monthly income of €601–1,800, while nearly 70 per cent of those aged 65 or more years had €301–900. These differences are highly significant statistically. Household income data therefore point in the same direction as those for education: the levels for UPOP students were clearly higher than among the general elderly population.

TABLE 3. *Economic activity status of the general population aged 55+ years and of UPOP students aged 55+ years by age-groups, Spain 2005*

Status	UPOP students		Spanish population ¹	
	55–64 yrs	65+ yrs	55–64 yrs	65+ yrs
	<i>Percentages</i>			
In paid employment	8.5	0.2	35.6	2.1
Pre-retired (not yet a pensioner)	34.5	3.6	–	–
Retired pensioner (had worked previously)	25.5	76.5	25.1	65.5
Pensioner (had not worked previously)	3.6	11.7	5.3	17.3
Unemployed	4.2	0.4	7.9	0.4
Unpaid worker in the home	19.9	6.3	24.1	14.0
Other status	3.7	1.2	2.0	0.6
Sample size	(667)	(494)	(303)	(513)

Source: 1. CIS, Study 2594, February 2005.

Employment and economic activity status

To continue the socio-demographic analysis, we gathered data on the UPOP students' employment situations (Table 3).⁴ In Spain, the official retirement (or pension) age is 65 years for both men and women. The comparison is thus particularly relevant in the case of those aged 55–64 years, for people in this age group have the most diverse situations because of the spread of early retirement or pre-retirement.⁵ The most remarkable result is the exceptionally high percentage of retired pensioners and early-retired people amongst UPOP students, and the relatively low percentages in paid work, of pensioners who had not worked previously, and of unpaid workers in the home. As expected, the differences were strongest among those aged 55–64 years, but they were also marked among those aged 65 or more years. Given the high female presence among UPOP students, the opposite was expected (a greater presence of pensioners who had not worked previously). Questions of gender arise once again. It would seem that many women with characteristics that are relatively uncommon in the general older female population enrol on UPOP. In short, among women, it is mainly those who had worked outside the home who were enrolled.

Reasons for deciding to enrol on UPOP

To discover the students' reasons for enrolling on a university programme, the questionnaire offered a series of possibilities or motives, and the respondents were asked to record which had influenced their decision

TABLE 4. *Reasons for enrolling on a UPOP and personal outcomes by gender and education level, Spain 2005*

Reason given	Gender		Education level			All
	Men	Women	Primary ¹	Secondary	Higher	
<i>Percentages</i>						
A. Reasons for enrolling						
Partner is enrolled	14.0	6.0	13.1	7.0	9.7	8.6
Friends are enrolled	12.1	14.1	15.4	13.6	11.3	13.4
It was recommended	28.9	25.9	33.1	26.7	23.6	26.9
Regarded important to their personal fulfillment	66.6	64.8	61.5	68.1	63.3	65.4
Wanted to broaden knowledge	78.9	78.8	73.5	83.8	75.3	78.8
Wanted to find out about university	39.7	36.7	39.2	43.9	26.3	37.7
Interested in the programme content	65.9	64.9	57.3	66.6	67.6	65.3
Have spare time and preferred activity	74.4	61.3	60.0	63.7	71.8	65.5
Wanted to get out of the house and meet people	38.1	35.9	37.7	34.0	39.1	36.6
B. Outcomes of attendance						
Knowledge has increased	75.0	73.8	73.1	79.3	66.8	74.2
Well-being has improved	53.0	54.3	54.2	54.9	53.1	53.9
Circle of relationships has grown	48.1	54.0	58.5	54.4	44.8	52.1
Health has improved	21.1	24.5	30.4	23.0	20.1	23.4
Have discovered things that did not know	63.8	60.5	70.0	64.3	50.9	61.6
View on life or the world has changed	39.9	34.9	45.8	38.0	26.8	36.5
Sample sizes	(464)	(972)	(260)	(697)	(373)	(1,436)

Note: Percentages of those who stated they were influenced or affected 'greatly' or 'considerably' by the stated reasons or consequences. 1. Primary education or less. The total number in the three educational categories is less than 1,436 because some respondents marked two or more education levels and have been omitted.

'greatly', 'considerably', 'somewhat', 'a little', or 'not at all'. Table 4 shows the percentages of students who selected the 'greatly' or 'considerably' options.⁶ Amongst the declared reasons for enrolment on UPOP, those of both an educational character (*e.g.* to broaden knowledge, interest in programme content) and of a social character (*e.g.* to fill spare time, or to meet people) were important. Two significant differences between men and women emerged. More men attended 'because their partner is enrolled' (14% compared with 6% of women), and 'because they have spare time and prefer this to other activities' (74.4% as against 61.3%). It appears that women were more likely to pursue other activities that interested them equally or more than UPOP, although many female respondents also affirmed the 'preferred use of spare time' reason.

The reasons for enrolment have been analysed by the student's previous education (Table 4). Among those with only primary school education

(or less), an above-average percentage responded that they attended UPOP because their partner or friends did so, or because someone had recommended the programme, and they were less likely to have enrolled to fill their spare time, or because they were interested in the programme content. Overall, however, the level of previous education had relatively little influence on the motivation for enrolment, since ‘because I want to broaden my knowledge’ attracted the most responses in all three educational categories – the highest percentage (83.8) was among the students with secondary but not higher education.

Outcomes of attending UPOP

We now turn to the students’ reports of the outcomes of attending UPOP. This information, as with the motivational data, was collected by the respondent’s rating of pre-coded categories using ‘greatly’, ‘considerably’, ‘somewhat’, ‘a little’, or ‘not at all’ (Table 4, Section B).⁷ The results broadly confirm the widely held idea in the UPOP field that the programmes fulfil both an educational function and social functions. Apart from the most obvious and expected outcomes, namely that the students increased their knowledge (74.2%) and discovered things that they did not know (61.6%), over one-half of the respondents stated that their personal wellbeing had improved and that their circle of relationships had grown. Also of note are that 23.4 per cent of the students reported improvements in their health, and 36.5 per cent reported that their view on life or the world had changed in certain respects. The differences by gender were negligible, although the women claimed that their circle of relationships had grown and their health had improved to a greater extent than the men, whereas more men discovered things that they did not know and had changed their view of life or of the world.

The responses to the same question were broken down by level of previous education and several clear differences emerged (Table 4). The lower the student’s level of previous education, the greater the percentages whose circle of relationships grew and whose health had improved and, more logically, the higher the percentage that discovered things that they did not know, or whose view on life or the world had changed. The results appear to show that attendance on UPOP has a greater (presumably positive) impact on students whose level of previous education was lower, regardless of their motivations to enrol on the programme. It should be pointed out, however, that the response to ‘personal wellbeing has improved’ was practically the same among the students of all three educational levels.

To whom should the programmes be aimed?

Any definition of a group of people as ‘old’ on the grounds of age involves some level of arbitrariness. ‘The choice of [a particular] age is a political, not a scientific, decision’ (Paillat 1996: 35). This prompted us to include a question in the survey on to whom the programmes should be aimed. The most obvious result is that a large majority of students (64.1 %) thought that they should be open to any adult who wished to attend. A much lower percentage thought that the programmes should be aimed at those aged over 60 or 65 years (15.4 %), at those aged over 50 or 55 years (18.3 %), or at those aged over 40 or 45 years (2.1 %). It is recognised, however, that the statement ‘any adult who wishes’ has an attraction effect that may have biased the results. Usually, however, such effects are strongest for the options that correspond most closely to the real situation (in this case ‘people aged over 50 or 55’), but that option was rejected by most respondents. What probably occurred, in our view, is that UPOP students were aware of the arbitrariness of the age criterion, and subscribed to the belief that nobody should be excluded from education programmes on the grounds of age – including a low retirement age – even when the programmes do not share the instrumental character (or employment-skills orientation) common to other higher education courses.

Discussion and recommendations

Apart from the educational function, manifest or ‘official’, the findings of this research leave no doubt as to the wider social functions – whether latent or ‘unofficial’, or manifest and openly recognised – that UPOP fulfil. However much this issue has led to opposing opinions, if we accept it as a fact, one then recognises a defining characteristic of UPOP. People come to these programmes in search of education, but also to meet other people, to make social contacts and to fill their spare time. If these outcomes are accepted as worthwhile, then we should recognise that the benefits of the programmes could be increased by making them available to all age groups.

UPOP are aimed specifically at older adults, although those who attend are relatively young (and very few are in advanced old age, for instance over 70 years). This suggests that if UPOP seek to be programmes for ‘older people’, they are not entirely succeeding and need to be revised. The findings also confirm the socially-selective profile of UPOP students, especially in terms of level of education and, more broadly, their ‘middle class’ status. As Lemieux (1997: 80–1) stated, the programmes’ selective

nature has been criticised since their inception. On questions of gender, the study has confirmed what was anticipated, namely the high proportion of women enrolled on UPOP, a fact of particular social interest. In this regard, UPOP may be fulfilling a particularly beneficial emancipating or liberating function for many women. It has been shown that the women students were more heterogeneous than the men, since among them there were greater disparities between those who worked or had worked outside the home and those who were occupied exclusively in the domestic sphere (and with the many who combined the two). Women who had been in paid employment were more likely to enrol on UPOP than those who had worked exclusively at home. This fact again invites reflection on the possibility of bringing these programmes closer to groups of people most in need of liberating or emancipating interventions.

We believe that there are interesting possibilities for improving UPOP as programmes specifically for older people. Various strategic changes could increase access to older people, to those in the lower social classes and to those – especially women – who have worked only in the domestic environment (these characteristics are widespread amongst today's older people). First, more attention should be given to publicity and marketing. As with most social interventions, it is possible to do more than merely 'open doors', and recruitment campaigns could target specific groups. If taken seriously, this would certainly involve high quality market and social research, and possibly specialist teams to design and run the campaigns. Secondly, new information and communications technologies (ICT) could be used to provide different kinds of 'distance' participation for those who, because of disability, lack of time or long travel distance from the universities, either cannot or do not wish to attend classes. Many universities feature ICT studies in their programmes for older people, and these have shown that many are predisposed and capable of learning and using these new technologies. Raising and expanding the attractiveness of the programmes will above all require research, more professional organisation and, of course, imagination.

In more general terms, UPOP need to be introduced gradually but widely into social-services and community-education information networks. There may be widespread agreement that an understanding of the social and educational needs of individuals or groups (including older people) is less in the universities than in the social and community services. The university's role should primarily be to design and deliver its programmes, thereby making its resources available to the community. By working in this way, UPOP would maintain close links with other social and educational programmes, something that, on the whole, is not presently the case.

A more critical evaluation begins with the hypotheses that, for many people, the attraction of UPOP lies precisely in their selectivity, and that this is encouraged by their current way of operating, although none of the parties involved openly recognise or approve this goal. If this is the case, the role of the public universities with government subsidies in organising and running this type of activity should be questioned. Non-formal education programme models, based on the initiatives of the people who wish to learn, would be more appropriate. It can be argued that formal and non-formal models respond to different realities and objectives, whether explicit or not. It appears obvious, for example, that non-formal programmes have a greater capacity to cover local and population-specific variations in educational needs, regardless of the person's economic and social position, while formal programmes are bound to be less widely available and more selective. Formal university programmes are not normally available outside their physical boundaries. This absence is felt not only in rural areas, but even more in large cities, where one or a few universities offer places for no more than a few hundred older people, and where problems of inequality and social exclusion are deeper and more hidden. Moreover, at a local level, as in small towns, villages or neighbourhoods, information dissemination, orientation and assessment tasks can reach larger fractions of the population and be more effective and egalitarian. Formal university programmes cannot therefore entirely substitute for non-formal learning activities. Educational needs are diverse and demand varied and flexible models and measures.

The current roles and achievements of UPOP for older people in Spain revive the enduring debate in social gerontology about the merits (and demerits) of discrimination, either positive or negative, on the grounds of age. Exclusion from paid work through compulsory retirement policies is negative discrimination, while formal university programmes aimed at people aged more than 50 or 55 years discriminate positively in favour of older people. The two policies or practices are connected. University programmes for older people, like many other services for the age group, generally assume that the recipients do not have the need or desire to study for reasons of employment but are motivated by other factors. This attitude is the complement of the uncritical acceptance of enforced retirement from paid work on the grounds of age, with no account taken of the needs, capabilities and preferences of the individuals concerned. In this way, various policies (UPOP included) operate as ancillaries to compulsory retirement and contribute to the contemporary social construction of being 'old'.

Formal and non-formal programmes are suited to different objectives. Educational programmes aimed specifically at older people could be

justified in the non-formal learning environment. They would not necessarily be provided by education or training centres, although they could make use of them, and the programmes would have a marked local character. It is more likely that a course could be designed for a defined local population of older people, whose characteristics, needs and wants had been established, than for the generality of older people. Such courses would respond to the educational needs of a relatively homogeneous group of people who have lived in specific places, through the same events, and have a shared a socio-educational background. This would be a practical and useful application of the cohort perspective in gerontology and its understanding. Formal university programmes, being less amenable to local variation, would focus on more academic (or knowledge-centred) objectives. The clientele should be determined by the desire to pursue these educational aims, not by their age.

This study has shown that those who attend UPOP are mainly either retired pensioners or in early retirement. UPOP are clearly helping many in these groups re-engage with social activities and life from which they have been excluded by their work. This may be the main reason why, as seen daily by those working in UPOP, many students when they complete one course want to continue with another, and do not easily find the right moment to withdraw. It is also clear that taking a UPOP is not usually an element in a truly life-long learning strategy. Enrolment is more closely associated with the break from paid work than with continuous involvement in education and learning, which confirms their *de facto* association with the policy of compulsory retirement. Whether the UPOP objectives of raising personal fulfilment and social integration are in practice aimed at all retired people, or alternatively towards those undergoing the transition from work to retirement, is very much open to debate. We can see no reason why some education programmes, even though not employment-oriented, should be exclusively aimed at people over a certain age. The fact that other institutions discriminate on the grounds of age does not justify universities doing the same when taking pedagogic, not political, decisions. Age-eligibility is most often for administrative convenience, and has no educational, welfare or social purpose (Breda and Schoenmaekers 2006). As we have seen above, this is how the UPOP students themselves understand the situation. It is recognised, however, that even if the age criterion is removed, the majority of those attending might still be in the early years of their retirement, but they would have enrolled for reasons beyond the control of the universities, for example that they had spare time and wished to make new social contacts.

Given the study's findings, we believe it would be more logical for formal, non-instrumental university programmes (the UPOP model) to be

made available to all adults and to offer flexible courses that promote access to all ages, groups and social strata. In this way, the courses would come closer to providing the resources for life-long or permanent learning. The objectives of these programmes should be emancipating and liberating, and their mode of delivery should be especially participative. Why are universities not providing courses in this way? Why are UPOP not available to adults of all ages, and why are they not organised along truly participative and critical lines? Although there is no direct relation, it seems logical that, in an economic system that promotes superfluous consumption and requires a mass of submissive workers and consumers, from the conservative standpoint there are good reasons for excluding younger adults from liberating or emancipating education. The reasons for the absence of this provision are probably similar to those that deter the growth of retirement-preparation programmes, or of interventions that promote inter-generational relationships. The conservative stance prefers university programmes for older people to distance themselves from any critical or participative position and to have a relatively rigid structure, in both content and organisation. Universities, however, have enough autonomy to innovate and to change towards the dissemination of much more open and critical approaches in their programmes and courses.

Acknowledgments

The research presented in this paper was part of a larger project on *The Expansion of University Programmes for Older People as a Social Phenomenon* funded by *Fundació Bancaixa* (Grant P1.1B2003-19) and *Universitat Jaume I de Castelló* (Spain). It was undertaken between December 2003 and November 2006.

NOTES

- 1 Some questions on socio-demographic characteristics adopted the definitions and categories used by the Spanish government statistical agency, *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (CIS) in its surveys, to facilitate data comparability.
- 2 On an estimated universe of 30,000 students, for a confidence interval of 95.5 per cent and $p = q$, the sample error would be ± 2.56 per cent for the whole sample ($n = 1,448$) on the assumption of simple random sampling.
- 3 The advantage of CIS surveys is that their data are very recent. Every year the CIS carries out various 'opinion surveys' that gather socio-demographic information. Most of the presented comparative tables refer to people aged 55 or more years, as UPOP programmes are primarily aimed at this age group. The 8.4 per cent of the UPOP students that were below this age were therefore excluded from the comparison.
- 4 Obviously the status of 'unpaid worker in the home' (sometimes 'homemaker') is compatible with and could coexist with any of the other economic-activity status

categories. Research on people's employment situations, to be sensitive to questions of gender, should take this into account. For this study, however, a priority was to make the survey data comparable with the CIS statistics. In addition, our understanding is that the 'worker in the home' option, which was strategically placed last in the list of options, was chosen by respondents when no previous option applied. As the questionnaire was self-administered, a number of people, especially women, marked two categories ('worker in the home' and another). In these cases, we selected the other option for the sake of comparability.

- 5 'Early retirement' was not identified in the CIS survey, but we considered its inclusion in the UPOP student survey to be useful, since being in this life-course stage motivated many people to enrol on UPOP.
- 6 As the questionnaire was self-administered, a high percentage of respondents did not complete all the options, but only those who, it would seem, best expressed the factors that motivated them to join the programme. We have therefore not analysed the nuances suggested by the five semantically-differentiated grades (for which there was much missing data), but the analysis was strengthened by the inclusion of all the cases.
- 7 As in the analysis of motivations, and for the same reasons, we present only the percentages of respondents who selected the 'greatly' and 'considerably' responses for each of the possible consequences.

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Accepted 20 September 2006

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