


# A possibility for active aging: university activities for the elders

*Vislumbrando uma possibilidade para o envelhecimento ativo: as atividades universitárias para idosos*

*Una posibilidad de envejecimiento activo: actividades universitarias para personas mayores*

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To reveal the conditions that allow the Open University for the Elderly to be a possibility for active aging.

**Method:** Qualitative study anchored in the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism and in the methodology of Grounded Theory. From April to October 2020, 14 elderly people, two coordinators, and six teachers linked to university activities for the elderly participated in individual interviews. Data analysis was carried out by three interdependent coding steps - open, axial and integration - with the support of the Atlas.ti software.

**Results:** The conditions that allow the program to be configured as an opportunity for active aging are related to the meanings attributed to aging well; the social determination of participation; motivations in the search for the program; the functions performed by the program; and public and institutional policies of the university to which it is linked.

**Final Considerations:** University activities for the elderly are a possibility for active aging, but socially constructed barriers make access to them difficult.

**Keywords:** Healthy aging. Universities. Retirement.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Desvelar as condições que permitem à Universidade Aberta à Terceira Idade configurar-se como possibilidade para o envelhecimento ativo.

**Método:** Estudo qualitativo ancorado no referencial teórico do Interacionismo Simbólico e metodológico da Teoria Fundamentada nos Dados. Participaram, no período de abril a outubro de 2020, por meio de entrevistas individuais, 14 idosos, dois coordenadores e seis docentes vinculados às atividades universitárias para idosos. A análise dos dados foi realizada por três etapas interdependentes de codificações - aberta, axial e integração - com apoio do *software* Atlas.ti.

**Resultados:** As condições que permitem ao programa configurar-se como oportunidade para o envelhecimento ativo relacionam-se aos significados atribuídos sobre envelhecer bem; à determinação social da participação; às motivações na busca pelo programa; às funções executadas pelo programa e; às políticas públicas e institucionais da universidade a qual se vincula.

**Considerações Finais:** As atividades universitárias para idosos são uma possibilidade para o envelhecimento ativo, mas barreiras socialmente construídas dificultam o acesso às mesmas.

**Palavras-chave:** Envelhecimento saudável. Universidades. Aposentadoria.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Revelar las condiciones que permiten configurar la Universidad Abierta al Anciano como posibilidad de envejecimiento activo.

**Método:** Estudio cualitativo anclado en el marco teórico del Interaccionismo Simbólico y en la metodología de la Teoría Fundamentada. De abril a octubre de 2020, 14 personas mayores, dos coordinadores y seis profesores vinculados a actividades universitarias para personas mayores participaron en entrevistas individuales. El análisis de datos se llevó a cabo mediante tres pasos de codificación interdependientes: abierto, axial e integración, con el apoyo del *software* Atlas.ti.

**Resultados:** Las condiciones que permiten configurar el programa como una oportunidad para el envejecimiento activo están relacionadas con los significados atribuidos al buen envejecimiento; la determinación social de la participación; las motivaciones en la búsqueda del programa; las funciones realizadas por el programa; y las políticas públicas e institucionales de la universidad a la que se vincula.

**Consideraciones finales:** Las actividades universitarias para personas mayores son una posibilidad para el envejecimiento activo, pero las barreras construidas socialmente dificultan el acceso.

**Palabras clave:** Envejecimiento saludable. Universidades. Jubilación.

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## INTRODUCTION

The process of demographic transition, marked by the fast growth of the age group of the elderly when compared to younger age groups, is permeated by challenges, but also presents opportunities. In societies where the number of 60-year-old or older people is significant, a special attention should be given to them, for their own wellbeing and that of their families and society<sup>(1)</sup>.

In accordance with these perspectives is the idea of active aging, which is the process of optimizing health opportunities, participation, safety and learning throughout one's life, to improve the quality of life as one gets older<sup>(1)</sup>. It can be used as an individual aspiration, due to which individuals are expected to take advantage of opportunities according to their needs, capabilities, and preferences; it can also be used for the elaboration of policies that can provide the essential conditions for maintaining an active life<sup>(1-3)</sup>.

This process is related to several determinants, including social, economic, environmental, behavioral and personal, and transversal (culture and gender) ones, as well as determinants related to the access to social and health services<sup>(2,4-7)</sup>. This shows how necessary intersectoral actions are to reach the goals proposed, especially concerning public policies. There are several initiatives to promote active aging. One of them is the participation in university activities promoted by the program Universidade Aberta à Terceira Idade (UNATI - the Open University for the Elderly program)<sup>(8-9)</sup>.

The UNATI is an informal permanent education program, with an academic and multidisciplinary character. It sees aging as a process through which one can have pleasure and wellbeing through intellectual development<sup>(9-10)</sup>. Participation in this context has had a predictive role for behaviors that are favorable to health<sup>(11)</sup>, while indicating improvements in the health self-perception and the quality of life<sup>(12)</sup>.

Evidences have shown that the UNATI showed remarkable contributions to key elements of active aging<sup>(1,12)</sup>. However, the service still lacks subsidies to find its space in the political agendas, as it seeks to establish itself as a service with financial incentives from the government sector<sup>(13)</sup>. Understanding the elements that influence the participation in this context can guide proposals that can give more opportunities to the elders in micro (universities and UNATI) and/or macro political levels.

Considering the experiences of the subjects in the UNATI, that is, those of elders, coordinators, and professors, a question is raised: What are the conditions that allow the UNATI to become an alternative of active aging? It can be inferred that participating in this type of activity provides one

with highly significant experiences, which guide the actions of the individuals and can be modified and or reaffirmed according with the situations the subjects go through<sup>(14)</sup>. Considering the above, the objective of this study is to unveil the conditions that allow the UNATI to become a possibility of healthy aging.

## METHOD

This is a qualitative research using the Symbolic Interactionism (SI) as a theoretical framework<sup>(14)</sup> and Strauss's version of the Grounded Theory (GT) as a methodological framework<sup>(15)</sup>. The SI is a theory that aims to apprehend behavior, feelings, expectancies, and other elements from symbolic interaction. From its perspective, it is possible to understand how individuals interpret the objects and people with which they interact, and how this interaction directs their actions<sup>(14)</sup>. The GT, in turn, is a method that allows one to explain the actions of individuals in a certain context, and considering the social situations experienced<sup>(15)</sup>.

The setting of the study was the UNATI of a university located in a medium-sized Brazilian city. The UNATI has nearly 400 students, 35 professors, a general coordinator, and a pedagogical coordinator. This setting was chosen due to how easy it is to have access to the participants, since the researcher has had a previous contact with the program, from when she was a volunteer professor in one of the disciplines.

Data collection took place using individual interviews from April to October, 2020. It followed an instrument elaborated by the main researcher and evaluated by three PhD who are experts in qualitative research and/or gerontology. The script was sent through email to the evaluators, who discussed the form, the sequence, and the scope of the questions. The triggering question was: How do you understand the relationship between the UNATI and active aging? According with the GR<sup>(15)</sup>, during the process of data collection and analysis, new questions were inserted to explore the gaps and develop categories.

The subjects were asked individually, using phone calls, about their willingness to participate in the research. After they accepted participating, the interviews were scheduled, and the technologies that would mediate the interviews were agreed upon. This was done to reduce the risks of infection due to the public health emergency caused by the new coronavirus pandemic<sup>(16)</sup>. The tools used were video calls through the applications WhatsApp® and Google Meet, in addition to phone calls.

The interviews were carried out by a researcher with experience with qualitative researches, recorded using a

recording device, and transcribed in full. They lasted for a mean of 38 minutes. As the GT prescribes, participant selection followed the principles of theoretical sampling<sup>(15)</sup>. The first sample group, already defined by the research project, was formed by 14 elders, who attended to the following inclusion criteria: age  $\geq 60$  and having been studying at the UNATI for at least six months.

The first members of this group were chosen intentionally. Elders who had studied the subject taught by the researcher were invited. After that, specific people were searched that could help bringing a broader perspective in regard to the study object. Starting with the process of comparative data collection and analysis of the first sample group, the following gap was found: How does the UNATI, as an organ of a public university, enables strategies to promote active aging?

Therefore, data collection was targeted at the second sample group, formed by the general and pedagogical coordination of UNATI, which includes two participants. This is because the object being investigated had a significant relationship with the work process and/or with the initiatives proposed by the UNATI coordinators. After the collection was carried out with these groups, however, it became clear that it was necessary to develop the categories and to fill in the gap already mentioned.

The data showed that the actions of the professors modulated the actions and interactions in the university environment, and, as a result, they formed the third sample group. The professors were chosen intentionally, to include representatives from all fields of knowledge offered (physical and social environment; humanities; mental and physical health; communication processes and procedures; arts and culture; and rights and citizenship). Six professors formed the group and fit the inclusion criteria: having been working in the UNATI for at least six months.

Data collection was finished when new information stopped changing the configuration of the phenomenon. The categories were consistent in their properties and the dimensions and relations between them were well established<sup>(15)</sup>. The data were coded with the aid of the software Atlas.ti, version 8.4.24. As recommended by the GT, data collection and analysis were carried out simultaneously, that is, one interview was only carried out after the previous one was analyzed. To do so, the coding process took place in three interdependent stages: open, axial, and integration<sup>(15)</sup>.

During open coding the concepts were identified and grouped in categories and subcategories. During axial coordination, these categories and subcategories were organized

using a paradigmatic model formed by three components: conditions, action-interaction, and consequences<sup>(15)</sup>. In the last stage, integration, the relationships between the categories were interconnected around a central category, which revealed the phenomenon "The UNATI as a way to optimize opportunities for active aging."

The theoretical matrix was validated in a virtual meeting. Representatives from the three sample groups in the study participated in this meeting, and the criteria used were: fitness, comprehension, and theoretical generalization<sup>(15)</sup>. The data presented here originate from a PhD thesis, and due to its theoretical density, this article only contemplates the category that, concerning the use of the paradigmatic model, is set up as a condition - The UNATI as a possibility for wellbeing.

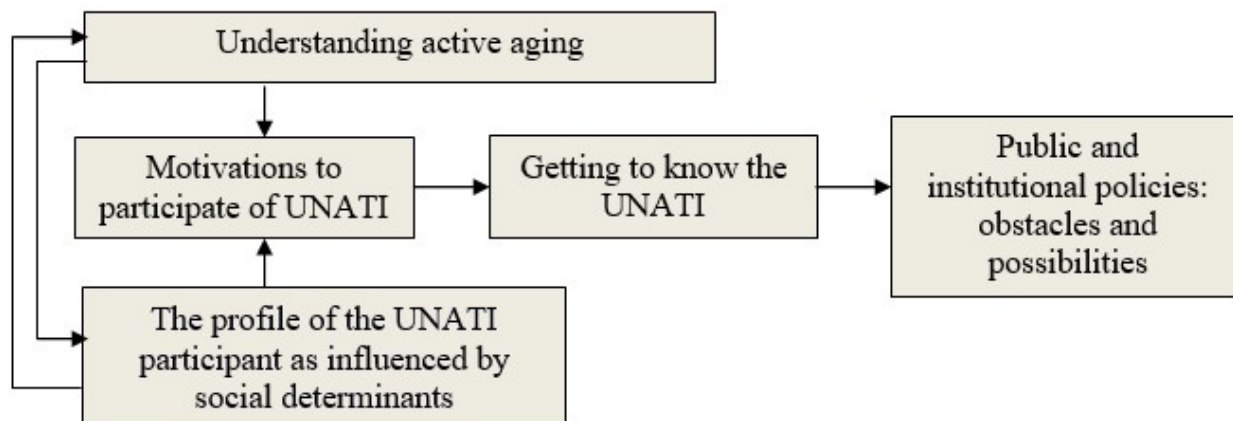
All ethical and legal aspects were respected. The project was approved under protocol No. 4.010.030; CAAE: 30056920.5.0000. 0104. The participants were identified using the letters E, C, P, corresponding to the words Elder, Coordinator, and Professor, followed by a number indicating the order of the interviews.

## ■ RESULTS

From the 400 elders, 14 formed the first sample group. From these, 9 were women, and their age varied from 62 to 82 years old, with a mean of 68 years old. Most were graduated ( $n=7$ ) or had completed high school ( $n=3$ ), followed by those with incomplete elementary education ( $n=2$ ), elementary education ( $n=1$ ), and *stricto sensu* post-graduation, with a PhD ( $n=1$ ). 2 participants had formal work, 11 carried out volunteer work, and 11 reported at least one chronic condition. Their participation in the UNATI varied from 1 to 10 years, with a mean of 4 years.

Regarding the coordinators ( $n=2$ ), both were in the second sample group; from the professors ( $n=35$ ), 6 formed the third group. Four from the six professors were men, from 28 to 72 years old, with a mean of 50 years old. Regarding their educational level, three were masters, four were doctors, and one had post-doctoral studies. The time working in the university varied from 3 to 25 years, with a mean of 15 years old. They had worked at the UNATI for a mean of 6 years, varying from 2 to 11.

Figure 1 shows the diagram of the category called "The UNATI as a possibility of wellbeing", which was based on five subcategories.



**Figure 1**– Diagram of the category “The UNATI as a possibility for wellbeing” and its subcategories.  
Source: the authors, 2020.

### Understanding active aging

Active aging was attributed the meaning of being and/or continuing to be active, and seen as a synonym of a successful aging. The participants also understood that its objective is promoting biopsychosocial through social (re)integration as one becomes older. It was understood that the search for active aging takes place during one’s whole life, not only when they become elders.

*In my understanding healthy aging is having physical and mental health conditions. It’s participating in activities during this period. Is to have an active participation, to participate in the social environment you are in. It’s searching for new knowledge and making available knowledge you accumulated through your life, your journey. (E-5)*

Certain conditions of health aging that can be applied to all stages of life were identified. They are: culture, health prevention, lifestyle and life conditions, and social and family interaction. Sex was mentioned, especially in regard to the difficulties of women to finish their formal education when young and entering the work market, and consequently, of accessing their retirement.

*I studied until the fourth grade. Then, my father, I think he was jealous of me and my sister, because we were little ladies, and took us out of school [...] I didn’t study for 43 years, because I got married. When I got married, high school came to our town and my husband said: “Fat chance that his woman would study!” (E-10)*

Regarding the conditions that influence this process, especially at an older age, elements mentioned were functional capacity, satisfaction with one’s life trajectory, the understanding of what it means to be an elder, and the way in which one faces the aging process. The possibility of organizing a satisfactory routine by planning for retirement and the possibility of achieving aspirations and life projects yet to be executed were also found to be relevant.

*My objective for when I stopped working was to do voluntary work. And so I did. My children were married so I started to do my volunteer work [...] it’s a lot of learning and it was really good for me. (E-6)*

The meanings attributed to active aging and the understanding of its conditions moved the individuals towards the resources they consider to be necessary to promote it. Starting with the opportunities there are in their context and with their internal and external motivations, the individuals became involved in physical, social, and intellectual activities, not to mention learning, manual, religious, and cognitive stimulant ones.

*The concept is already disseminated. Not only among us, but among the students. Aging is not seen as an end, but as a mean to develop a project of life, of cognition, of social coexistence. (C-15)*

*[...] this inner comprehension the person has about how to face life in regard to what has passed, what is happening, and what will come [...] is to stay open to how you will live. (D-17)*

Elders, coordination, and professors agreed about the concept of active aging. They also understood that these meanings are influenced by social determinants, which also modulate the profile of UNATI participants. This profile will be discussed in the next category.

### The profile of the UNATI participant as influenced by social determinants

The meaning attributed to old age, lifestyle, socioeconomic and health conditions, and sex, influenced participation in university activities. The meaning UNATI participants attribute to aging, the way they perceive it, is as a possibility of development. As a result, they make decisions whose goal is to strengthen this process.

On the other hand, the interaction of elders with their peers in the community represents a possibility of putting oneself in the place of the other, to understand their perspective. This interaction provides another concept and alludes to the understanding according to which aging, after retirement, is a synonym of getting involved in few activities, if any. The consequences of this meaning is perceived in the limits to the possibilities of engaging.

*Some elders don't search for any activity and isolate from everything. They think old age is to be home doing home chores. That isn't fulfilling to me. That's part of my daily life, but that's it, doesn't fulfill me, doesn't fill my time. I need something to do outside my home, a relationship, a learning experience. I need that, and I can't live without it. (E-8)*

It has also become clear that the participants from the UNATI come from a trajectory whose lifestyle is marked by the participation in different activities, in addition to work and to the adoption of healthy practices. That is, the elders, throughout their lives, selected stimuli that were relevant to their needs, and their aging is a continuity of these actions, as opposed to a milestone that marks the adoption of a new lifestyle.

In regard to socioeconomic conditions, especially concerning educational level, it modulated the access and the continuity of the participation at the UNATI. Elders with low educational level were afraid of searching for the UNATI, and self-evaluated as having an insufficient capacity to learn. This characteristic was also associated to the abandonment of courses, especially more theoretical ones.

Social class also influenced the access to the UNATI. It was found that those in this condition needed to be involved in work activities after retirement, so they can make ends

meet for themselves or their families, which has limited their participation. This also alludes to the fact that those in lower social strata feel, historically unauthorized to enter university and/or do not know that there is access for them and/or have difficulties to access it due to low educational level.

*I've seen in some surveys that the middle class is the public of the UNATI. So we don't reach the lower classes. The low classes still feel unauthorized to enter, sometimes they don't even know what the UNATI is. (C-15)*

Regarding sex, meanings were attributed as an attempt to explain the high number of women enrolled. It was found that they, despite having difficulties in access to education and work when young, tend to assume healthier lifestyles when older, which includes searching for educational activities. Men, as opposed to that, were attributed behavior that restrict them to few activities.

*[...] mostly men don't search for the UNATI. My theory is that women grow older and their minds open, they don't stagnate, everyday they try to fit in the modern age, while the men do not. Men close themselves in or just go to the same bar on the street corner or stay home dragging their flip-flops around and complaining. That's the profile of the man as he gets older. (E-11)*

Other factors filter the profile of participants, such as their health conditions and/or their functional capacity and responsibility in the care and/or attention to relatives or grandchildren who depend on them. These conditions are relevant, but the level of interest in enrolling, the support received (from relatives and the UNATI community), and the pleasure from participating are remarkable stimuli, providing a counterbalance to the influence of the determinants mentioned about allow for the profile of UNATI students to be heterogeneous.

*[...] my son took me to the UNATI of the university, he showed me everything and said "mom, you can come study here" [...] I thought I was the most ignorant, the slowest person from that small far away city, who didn't know anything here, that I'd be excluded, that I wouldn't be able to keep up with the students from here. But no! I was welcomed very well. The respect we have for each other, the care, the jokes, the friendships, the warmth. (E-10)*

*[...] there are those who did not go to college and UNATI is open. It includes from students with no higher education to others with PhDs (C-14)*

This subcategory allowed us to understand that the meanings from the interactions elders have in their communities and also in the UNATI have influenced the search for the service and its continuity. The sociocultural influence modulated the systems of meaning, which led to a profile of participants. However, in some situations, intrinsic motivational factors and social support stood out, leading to heterogeneity between the elderly students.

### Motivations to participate of UNATI

Domestic chores and/or work were insufficient to fulfill the biopsychosocial needs of the elders. Those who were retired and do not have formal jobs found themselves with little to know activities to work with. Furthermore, those who lived alone, whose relatives worked during the day, and those who did not participate in any type of activity felt alone.

*I used to take my children to work and school. I'd take all three, in the morning, each to a place, and then go back home. Since I was alone, I'd ride my bike or go walking. I'd get to the corner of the house and think "Where am I going? What am I going to do?", and stop and abandon this walk or bike ride. I'd go back home and sleep up to 11 o'clock and this became my routine. (E-3)*

These situations motivated the elders to interact with social objects, attributing meanings and interpreting their experiences in such a way that they saw a new reality that could accommodate their wishes. As they noticed that they needed to fill in the time they had available in an activity that went beyond their house chores and/or work, and perceive that they had the ability to develop through learning, they searched for the UNATI.

The development through learning was a motivation that was reinforced by the opportunity of being in a university environment. It was found that the UNATI allows for elders to know and integrate this environment, having classes with university professors and seeking, through this interaction, contributions to their cognition, intellect, and performance in daily life activities.

*[...] the professors themselves are at the peak of their intellectual activities. They have a lot of knowledge, and sharing this knowledge is one of the things that formed my expectations going in. (E-5)*

Other motivations included the possibility of social interaction with people in other age groups; the self-perceived

need to improve relationships through learning; updating and/or acquiring knowledge about scientific-technological advancement; being a good example of aging for family and society; and preparing for retirement.

*I expected to interact with people in the same age group, that I could feel embraced, welcomed to the group, something to that end, new friendships. And not only filling time, it's searching for culture [...] It's looking for friendship, interaction, and knowledge. (E-12)*

Coordinators and professors had external motivations associated with the needs imposed by demographic transition, with working in the field of researches about aging, and with the contributions of the UNATI in the fulfilling of the obligations of the university in society. The interns, in turn, mention the possibility of creating subjects according to their personal or professional interests. And for some of them, understanding aging, because they were close to old age and want to continue to be active after retirement, justified participation.

*[...] for a long period of my life I have been investing in studies in the field of knowing oneself. I thought about creating a discipline with content targeted at self-knowledge and spirituality in this age group [...] since I was starting my old age it was a subject that I felt I identified with to continue working, to continue active, to continue the process that I see as active, proactive and productive aging. (P-17)*

The motivations for the students, professors, and coordinators to participate and/or act result from the meaning they attribute to their perceived personal or professional needs and to their expectancies about the contributions of the program to society. These interpretations led the search for a bond and allow us to infer that the UNATI is seen as a possibility of active aging.

### Getting to know the UNATI

The elders got to know the UNATI through interviews they saw on television, projects executed through television in external environments and through the community itself (students, professors, and coordinators). However, when entering the program, some of them believed that it was only a leisure or social program, or that it offered formal courses, or simply did not know what it was. The lack of knowledge about the program also affected some professors.

*I imagined that the UNATI, since it has university professors, makes you think that you'll have a discipline with tests, that there will be an hour load. (E-6)*

*I wen on leave for my PhD and as I came back there was an opportunity to work with the UNATI. Its an invitation the UNATI extends to the departments. I was surprised "I don't know what that is, I don't know how I can contribute." I got surprised.(P-20)*

The participation allowed them to understand that the UNATI is a program that offers scientific knowledge in many fields, promoting the socialization of the elders in such a way as to encourage them to drive their own lives. It was also understood that the UNATI is different from other programs for elders, being unique in its offer of knowledge and being more challenging than other practices, due to the stimuli demanded for participation.

*The UNATI has this role that only it has. No one else does it. The churches are aimed at values and sacred texts. They aren't prepare to deal with this. Senior associations are more recreational. A space for teaching, research and socialization has to be the UNATI. So the UNATI is also a cultural space for that. (P-18)*

It was indicated how important it is to understand that the UNATI is not a leisure program, since, as an organ of the university, it must be based on the three pillars: teaching, research, and extension. The main focus is the first one, while the others are strategies to maximize the opportunities of participation. In regards to teaching, the creation of courses that originate from the great fields of knowledge, conducted from the different didactic-pedagogical lines, represented a way to adjust oneself to the aspirations of different profiles of elders.

*[...]the number of disciplines they offer varies. For instance, there are disciplines that demand a little more. So they go there knowing they'll have to think a bit [...] and there are those who don't want to think, who want to reproduce or improve manual skills, so they go there to learn origami or remember childhood toys [...]. And some of them are very pragmatic, they come to the UNATI to learn informatics or English, because they want to travel. (C-15)*

Regarding extension, a few initiatives were mentioned, mostly resulting from partnerships with projects executed in the university. In regard to researches, the UNATI was a

field that was expanding in many different fields, including investigations attributed specifically to the older public and others about the actions and/or interface of the program with the numerous public policies. These were connected to graduation and post-graduation projects, under the advisory of researchers from the university or not.

The participants expressed their expectations in regard to what they considered to be the UNATI role before they entered their context and, also their understanding after participating. It was also understood that the actions of the UNATI, connected to the role of the university, must be understood by both its members and by society itself.

### **Public and institutional policies: obstacles and possibilities**

Obstacles to participation in the UNATI were identified. The perception society has about senior citizens was found to be an obstacle for the elaboration and enforcement of adequate public policies. The focus on welfare found in policies, to the detriment of encouraging the development of competences, gives fuel to a distorted view about aging, obfuscating the importance of university for the elderly and raising obstacles to the encouragement of programs such as UNATI.

*The welfare is important for elders who are under significant economic jeopardy, but they are not really put to good use. I don't mean that they are not in the work market, but that the things the elders have to teach could be more actively put to good use. We need to learn as a society and continue learning with the elders. (C-16)*

The financial support from the State to maintain the university has influenced on the operational capabilities of the UNATI, considering that this organ does not have its own budget. The current crisis, especially regarding the decreasing number of effective professors, due to the lack of new hired professionals, has had a negative impact in the courses offered at the UNATI. The university activities involve a smaller number of workers and, furthermore, State policies prioritize research and extension from full professors, overloading them and harming their engagement in teaching at the UNATI.

*We know how hard it is to offer a discipline. Three years ago there were more courses than today. This is a fight, because since the UNATI has no budget of its own, they must take advantage of the structure of the university. (E-5)*

*[...] we lost a lot of professors due to the crisis of university teaching. Since new professors weren't being hired, others had to fill in for them [...] All departments suffered a lot with retirements. For example, if I retire now, they (the State) will not hire a full professor, maybe not even a temp. So the UNATI will be short one professional too. (C-15)*

The human resources of the secretariat and coordination of the UNATI were found to be insufficient to carry out the program. Considering this shortage of human resources, the strategy used to define the operational capacity of the UNATI in regard to the number of students is the drawing of spots. That is why the UNATI is careful in its publicity, due to the limited number of people it can attend.

In the scope of the university, it was found that it was necessary to find an institutional strategy to guide/integrate the faculties and the UNATI. Possibilities were found considering the current capacities of the institution itself, including the consolidation of geriatrics and gerontology groups and the integration of elders in events promoted by it.

*I think that it's still like there are two universities in one [...] by experimenting we find what is the most successful path. We could even have an official letter that asked all courses to communicate to the UNATI when there is a lecture or a round of discussions, so the UNATI students could have access to these events. Because usually these events have very nice contributions, and I think it's a path towards dialogue and interacion. (P-18)*

*The surfacing of a strong gerontology field in the university would be a significant advancement [...] It would make it so working with the old age gained strenght and visibility. (P-16)*

Another issue mentioned as something that could be done in an institutional policy was the intergenerational integration. This started with the meeting between UNATI students and regular students, be it through the participation of the former in graduation disciplines or through the use of the UNATI as a field for the internships and/or practice of the latter.

Finally, it was found that the obstacles limit the repercussion of the UNATI for active aging. And, to deal with them, the subjects mentioned viable strategies that could minimize them and/or broaden the possibilities of active aging, such as the creation of gerontology groups, the participation of elders in regular activities of graduation, and the strengthening of intergenerational integration at the university.

## DISCUSSION

This study revealed the conditions that allowed the UNATI to be a possibility of active aging. These were related to the meanings attributed to healthy aging, to the actions carried out to achieve it, and to social determinants, which influenced these perceptions and actions and, also, to the participation in university activities for the elderly. Other conditions were related with the forms in which the UNATI works and with the institutional public policies that make feasible or unfeasible the possibilities for active aging in the university context.

Regarding the understanding of healthy aging, as understood in the first subcategory, the participants attributed to this concept the meaning of successful aging. This is related to the set of factors that allow the individual to continue to work effectively from a mental and physical standpoint<sup>(17)</sup>. Active aging, in turn, considers one's continuous participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual, and civic subjects, not only one's capacity to be physically active and integrate a workforce<sup>(2)</sup>.

The results reiterated the understanding according to which being involved in activities is not only a personal choice, but also involves, both nationally and internationally, social, economic, and environmental contexts<sup>(4-7)</sup>. Furthermore, the interrelations between personal characteristics connected to the socioeconomic conditions and to health problems are also relevant determinants of participation<sup>(4)</sup>.

Individual factors that limit participation in social activities related to age (>80 years old), to the presence of numerous health conditions, to cognitive compromise, to poor eyesight<sup>(4,6)</sup> and poor hearing, to the presence of depressive symptoms and to a bad health self-evaluation<sup>(5)</sup>. Socioeconomic factors, in turn, are associated to low educational level and low income<sup>(4,6-7)</sup> and to the perception of an insufficient social support<sup>(6)</sup>.

Studies suggest predictors associated with environmental factors, such as the access to local resources, and to social factors, connected with the level of confidence required to carry out an activity, to communication, to the social policies adequate to elders, to the absence of limiting social norms, to discrimination due to their age and to social stress<sup>(4,6)</sup>. In regard to sex, women are more likely to participate in social activities, in volunteer work, or in education activities, while men prefer to engage in civic and work activities<sup>(7)</sup>.

These characteristics filter the participation in activities, and the UNATI is no exception. Researches indicate that most participants are women from 60 to 70 years old, married and



with complete high school or higher education<sup>(10,18)</sup>. Barriers to participation include health issues, the difficulty to access due to distance, the lack of information about the program, and the need to care for relatives<sup>(10)</sup>. Therefore, social determinants can be limiting to participate in university activities, affecting even the motivation to enroll in them.

Researches carried out in different contexts indicate the need to acquire knowledge, personal development, the search for strategies to deal with change, the occupation of the time available, and the broader social relations as expectations of the elders who seek the program<sup>(10)</sup>. It can be understood that motivators for participation, both for the elders and the workers, come from meanings attributed to the interaction in this context, which allows us to infer that the UNATI is seen as an opportunity to attend these meanings and, therefore, is an opportunity for active aging.

Another condition identified is related to the actions of the program, which, in the Brazilian context, depends on the universities to function. In this context, the teams are qualified and contribute, with excellence, for the program to function. Additionally, the UNATI, since it is inside the formal university environment, has provided opportunities for intergenerational integration and for the improvement of teaching for the elderly public, not to mention the development of extension and research projects and gerontology<sup>(9)</sup>.

Public policies represent another condition which has a relevant influence as one considers the connection between the UNATI and active aging. There are advances in the scope of these policies to attend to the needs and rights of the elders, but there is still a gap between what they prescribed and what is actually put into practice. This is due to the difficulties to implement them, considering budgetary constraints and government decisions<sup>(19)</sup>.

Policies of attention to the elders must be followed, including those related to active aging, to the sharing of responsibilities between sectors, and to permanent institutional partnerships. Indicators decided upon by the whole territory are indispensable, with intersectoral corresponsibilization to guide the processes of formulating, implementing, monitoring, and achieving the results aimed at by the policies<sup>(20)</sup>. This process could make the university and the UNATI more significant in the enforcing of said policies, which have had a direct influence over the practices in the context of their strengths and weaknesses.

Finally, the UNATI is seen as a context that presents opportunities for active aging, but also as a context of challenges. In regard to the opportunities, we believe it provides the contribution universities must have with society directly, as it attends to the needs of the elders, and, indirectly, through them will help them collaborating with family and society. To face these challenges, strategies are necessary that attempt to diminish social inequalities through people's lives, so they can have more opportunities of an active aging<sup>(5,7)</sup>, such as the UNATI.

## ■ FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study made it possible to show that the UNATI is a possibility of healthy aging. The conditions that allow that to happen are related to the meanings attributed to successful aging and to the actions carried out to achieve it; to social determinants that influence participation in activities, such as socioeconomic and health issues; and to the motivators of the search for the program, among which are the acquisition of knowledge, personal development, and the improvement of social relations.

Other conditions are associated with the function of the UNATI, which is guided by the same pillars of traditional universities (education, research, and extension), and to the public and institutional policies that make possibilities for active aging feasible or unfeasible in university.

The limitations of the research are related to the fact that the interviews were carried out using technology, which prevented researcher and interviewee from becoming closer to one another. This does not decrease the importance of the findings, which contributed to public health and nursing as they showed the relevance of a public and free education program with the potential to bring to effect a health policy. Furthermore, it has the potential to subsidise the organization of the UNATI in universities, especially public ones.

In addition, nursing, a professional category that is involved in many contexts of practice and management, can have this program as an ally in the attention to elders, as well as strengthen it as a potential source for the attention of an intersectoral network. Finally, in regard to teaching, they can improve the space of the UNATI by making it a field for the practice of future nurses, to form their competences in the caring of non-dependent elders.

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