

Chapter 9

Gendered Patterns in Lifelong Learning in Spain in the European Context: The Opening of New Cultural Spaces for Women

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Abstract

Starting from the premise that lifelong learning is a significant asset when it comes to enjoying an active ageing process and an important resource for exploring new interests and capacities that were not developed in previous life stages, this contribution explores our findings regarding the participation of older women in higher education in Cantabria, a Northern Atlantic Spanish region. Through analyzing secondary data provided by the main higher education institutions and associations involved with the organization of lifelong learning programmes, it identifies gendered patterns of participation in both the formal and informal educational options. Women's greater involvement in these programmes is analyzed in terms of overcoming a patriarchal traditional culture that in past times had not considered women as active participants in educational spaces. This was particularly clear in the context of the years following the end of the Spanish Civil War and during Franco's dictatorship. Through education, for women, ageing becomes a new life opportunity for self-construction and empowerment as well as for their own decision making in relation to their own life chances. Educational changes implemented in Spain in the last decades have opened up many alternatives to formal education at adult educational centres and university levels. These include informal and semi-formal programmes and educational options opened to people independently of their previous educational backgrounds that provide many opportunities for filling educational gaps to generations of women who could not have consistent access to formal, high-quality training in their youth.

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Introduction

In recent decades, as the population of elderly people in our societies has grown and welfare states have been recognizing and extending their specific rights in the framework of an active citizenship, educational possibilities for people in the older age groups have increased year upon year.¹ The idea of training and education concentrated in the first third of the life cycle is widely overcome by international programmes. Social dynamics point to the need of continuous training throughout everyone's life. This has an impact on both formal and non-formal educational and training plans and programmes.²

The social and academic debate to face up  this challenge and contribute to social development has pointed out the need to focus institutional answers to higher university educational demands through a combination of educational actions, most notably with regards to the flexibilization of the academic requirements to access university programmes and in training methodology.³ As our research suggests, this may be the outcome of a significant demand on the part of older women who try to create educational spaces within the educational systems which respond to their needs and wishes. This also adds an important challenge, both social and academic, to deal with.

We present a case study focussed on Cantabria, a Northern Spain Atlantic region with a population of around 580,000 inhabitants, which constitutes 1.5% of the population in Spain. However, it represents many of the common Spanish patterns, apart from its own specific ones. Together with Galicia, Asturias, the Basque Country and inner Castilla-León, Cantabria is one of the smallest autonomous communities of the country and one of the regions in Europe with a highest average of ageing (Pérez-Díaz, Abellán García, Aceituno Nieto, & Ramiro Fariñas, 2020), due to the structural decreasing of the birth rate in parallel with the highest European life expectancy (which in Spain is 80.3 male/85.7 female) (WHO, 2020).

Therefore, Cantabria faces the specific challenges of an ageing and feminized society. If, currently, in Cantabria female life expectancy at birth is a little higher than 85 years, by 2030 it could exceed 87 (INE, 2020). In this context, what older women do is not only important for them but also has a significant impact on their social and cultural environment.

Regarding cultural education and training, older people are the population group representing the collective with the lowest level of education (Abellán, Ayala, & Pujol, 2017); furthermore: the older the age, the lower the level. Particularly, as is generally very well known, this is rooted in the first half of the twentieth century and the lack of specific plans focussed on female education – a weakness which continued during the period of the Franco dictatorship. However, older women continue to bear an historical educational deficit, resulting from a patriarchal

culture that had prevented them from knowing about and taking advantage of cultural and educational opportunities. In fact, access to education was limited by the values preponderant in society, which did not recognize any personal or social advantages of education for women (Aparicio, 2013).

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This deficit has brought about a gender gap which distances women from men in their educational attainments. The situation is more acute in Cantabria than in Western Europe, where even though women present a lower level of education overall, the difference is not as significant as in the case of our region. In general, dissimilarities are not as great as they are in Cantabria (Table 9.1).

In particular, in Cantabria, most women of 65 years and older have obtained only a primary level of education, and they almost double their contemporaries (male) in the rate of illiteracy.⁴ The higher the level, the greater the distance between women and men (Table 9.2).

This situation has made many older women want to overcome their educational deficiencies and look for different ways to obtain a qualification, improve it or participate in cultural life (Ramos Toro, 2018). We cannot forget, as Anna Freixas points out (2013), that participating in these opportunities implies taking part in the public sphere and living beyond the restricted private context.

In particular, women's participation in the so-called Adult Education Centers (CEPA) can be considered as an example of how women try to improve this educational situation. The CEPA are official centres for schooling people over 16 years of age in order to obtain an academic credential or to take other kinds of courses

Table 9.1. Educational Level of the Population of Europe (EU 28) 55–74 Years Old.

	Women (%)	Men (%)
Less than primary, primary	38.9	31.1
Secondary	41.7	45.7
Tertiary	19.4	23.2

Source: Eurostat. *Data Browser*. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/education-and-training/data/database>.

Table 9.2. Educational Level of the Population of Cantabria over 64 Years Old.

	Women (%)	Men (%)
Illiterate	1.7	0.95
Less than primary, primary	60.2	47.2
Secondary	33.3	40.2
Tertiary	4.8	11.7



Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE). *Censo de Población y Viviendas* 2011.

in several subjects. Data about students enrolled in CEPA studies show that it is women who, to a greater extent, make use of this offer in order to earn an academic title that they could not obtain in the period of their childhood or youth. In fact, women represent around 80% of people registered in the formal educational offer (that allows the obtaining of a primary or secondary qualification) (Ministerio de Educación, 2020). In the same way, they are also the majority (more than 70%) in another type of non-formal education offered by these CEPA. These centres can thus be considered as a sort of second chance school for these women.

In addition to the CEPA, a great diversity of state entities, regional and local, foundations, associations and also universities have begun to offer a diversity of educational initiatives for this particular group (people over 65 years old, although some programmes accept younger people, as will be apparent later on). We have analyzed two important face-to-face educational offers: the programmes of the University of Cantabria and those organized by UNATE. In this paper, we leave aside the online and distant education offers of the UNED, an Open University with a presence in Cantabria.

Our results show clear gendered patterns in lifelong learning and the significant usage that women make of these educational opportunities, overcoming some historical patterns that are widely rooted and still have some impact on the present situation. They participate in greater measure than men in the less formalized educational programmes that are not linked to professional training. For women, getting older becomes a fundamental ally in the development of their subjectivity through participation in new learning opportunities.

Educational Spaces in Higher Education: The Senior Programme at the University of Cantabria

During the last decades, Spanish universities have put forward a variety of programmes specifically addressed to elderly people who want to enrich their educational experiences and critical skills. From the earliest French experiences, started in 1973 from the stimulus of Pierre Vellas at  Toulouse, followed quickly in Strasbourg, Rennes, Orléans and Annecy (Camb  Rivero & Díaz Galván, 2019, p. 108) and the undertakings of the Catalan universities in the 1980s, they proliferated at the turn of the century throughout the country (Blazquez Entonado, 2005). A National Spanish Association (AEPUM – Asociación Estatal de Programas Universitarios para Mayores) was set up in 2004, bringing together 46 higher education institutions involved in developing these programmes and offering a total of 51 different educational opportunities specifically designed for lifelong learning.⁵

While designed and taught by academics, these programmes are open to more diverse backgrounds than formal degree programmes and bring together in the same classroom retired university full professors and people with no formal or officially recognized previous qualifications. Unlike university courses leading to official degrees, going into these studies does not require any previous academic qualification for entry and, therefore, heterogeneity is a prominent feature of the student body in these educational projects.

In 2009, the University of Cantabria initiated its own offer, with the objective of bringing into being the idea of lifelong learning in the framework of an active and healthy ageing process. This Programme is a real *success story*, not only at the University of Cantabria but also in the whole of Spain in the last 15 years of experience.⁶

In the University of Cantabria, in which there have already been 3,110 registrations in the period of time between 2009/2010 and 2019/2020, showing a steadily growing evolution whereby in 2019/2020, the number of students enrolled was quadruple those of 2009/2020. The programme congregates people over the age of 50 who understand education as a life option which allows for personal development, for the betterment of abilities and skills, as well as the enjoyment of a worthwhile and satisfying life and the development of biographical projects of self-efficacy.

The participation of women in the programme has been in the majority since its beginnings, given that the overall number of registrations corresponding to women reaches two thirds. Nevertheless, coinciding with the implementation of a new and more demanding curriculum in 2015/2016, a slight decrease in women's enrolment has occurred. Nevertheless, during the last five years, women's participation in the programme has been stable at around 60% (Fig. 9.1).

This four-year programme offers specialized teachings in five areas of knowledge: Health and Environmental Sciences, Basic and Experimental Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities and Modern Languages. It completes its ordinary content-based lectures with hands-on workshops and field workshop trips. It allows for the

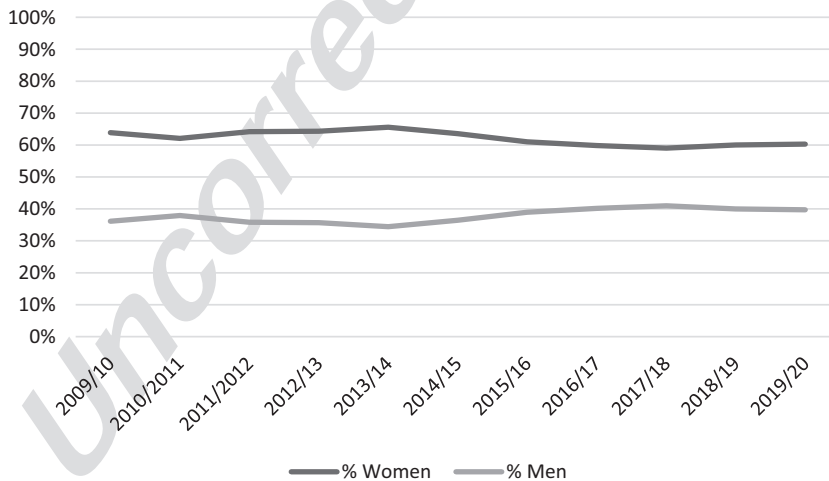


Fig. 9.1. Students' Enrolment in the Senior Programme of the University of Cantabria, 2009/2010–2019/2020. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

satisfying of the intellectual curiosity of people who, as they leave behind their active working lives, try to improve their education in order to develop their abilities and, ultimately, build full and better lives.

This personal and individual enrichment, however, might feed back into their communities not only in informal ways but also through more formalized alternatives of giving back and contributing to the betterment of society. Women are particularly active in this circular cultural exchange, as it has been documented that their participation and commitment as volunteers in a wide range of activities involving social work and civic contributions to the community is much higher than men's engagement in these freely taken on activities (García-Lastra et al., 2017).

If we look at the registration by age groups, we observe how, gradually, there has been an increasing general presence of people of more advanced ages in the programme's student body. Whilst in the first years the main weight of registrations was in the 60–64 age group, from 2014/2015 onwards the main weight is found amongst the 65–69 age group, and the rising age of students is on the increase (Fig. 9.2).

Although the age average of women students has increased more than men's, interestingly, women students in the Senior Programme are younger and start their educational journeys earlier in the age of maturity. This trend is very consistent with the greater interest on their part in taking advantage of opportunities that may not have been available to them in previous stages of their lives (Figs. 9.3 and 9.4).

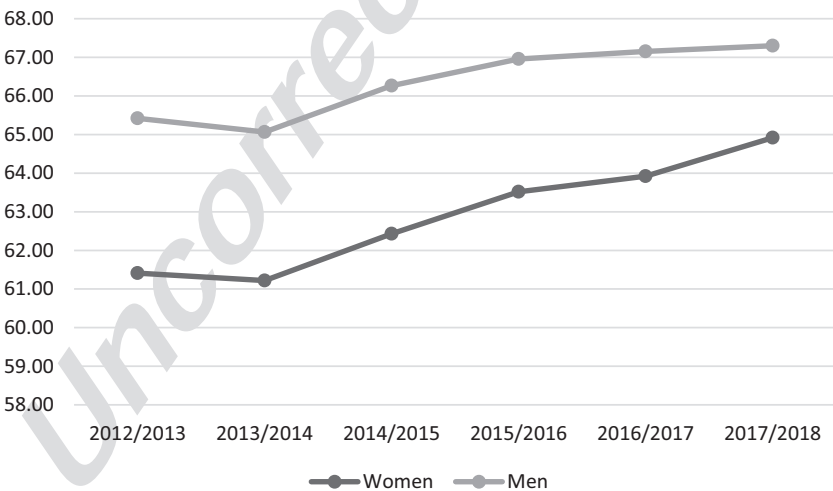


Fig. 9.2. Age Average of the Students in the Senior Programme, 2012/2013–2017/2018 *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

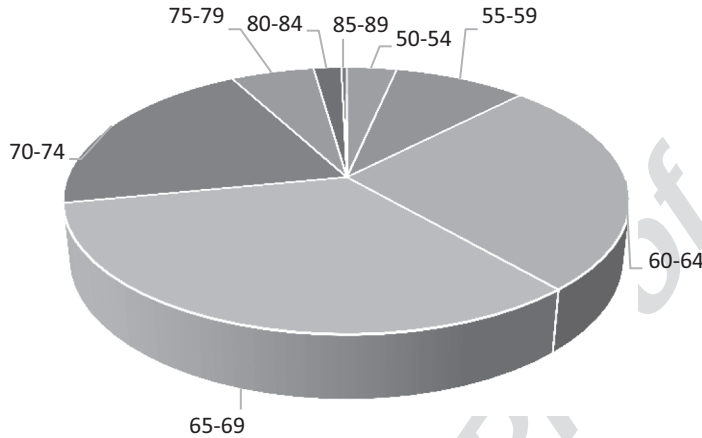


Fig. 9.3. Female Enrolment in the Senior Programme Broken Down by Age Groups, 2019/2020. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

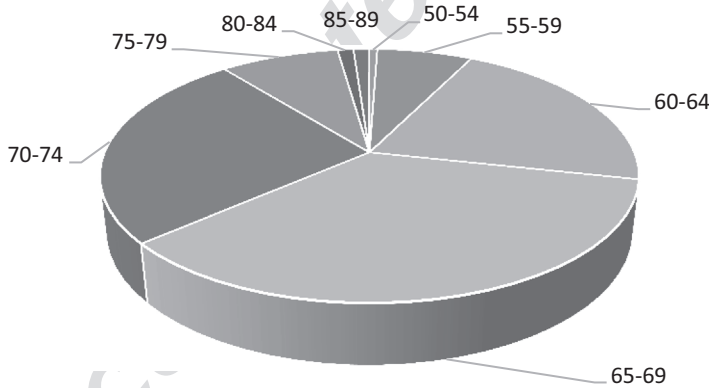


Fig. 9.4. Male Enrolment in the Senior Programme Broken Down by Age Groups, 2019/2020. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

The analysis of the student data of the University of Cantabria shows that the predominance of older women in the student body is peculiar to the Senior Programme and does not occur in programmes leading to official degrees, which are aimed at providing professional training and are much more demanding, both in requiring academic qualifications to access them and in requiring high levels of academic performance in order to progress through the curriculum.

The success of the specific university programmes when it comes to satisfying the educational requirements of people after their 50s is corroborated if we correlate this piece of data with the low registration of this collective in the official degrees offered by the University of Cantabria. Of course, the challenge is quite different when choosing one of these last options, due to the legal restrictions of access, in spite of specific requirements for people over 25 and over 45 without previous studies, cases where there are proofs of maturity and/or culture and qualification.⁷

Attending Official Degree Programmes: Older People at the University of Cantabria

For people over 50 years old, both women and men, studying official programmes is a real challenge that, when faced, produces a great commitment to the educational plan at every academic degree level: graduate, postgraduate and PhD levels. The higher the level, the lower the presence of people over 50 years old, but also, at the same time, the greater their personal commitment to the studies. The trends in the last decade of women's averages when taking part in these academic programmes also prove their capacity for creating specific spaces and patterns that are analyzed in the following pages.

On considering the official graduate degrees, in the academic years between 2012–2013 and 2017–2018, there have been a total amount of 25 registrations of people over 65 (7 women and 18 men). The registration in the official degrees, at this first step of the university official degree titles, by the age group that the senior programme is aimed at (that is, the over 50s), represents a very low percentage of the total student body (clearly less than 1%) and seems to have got smaller as the specific programme aimed at older people has consolidated (the already analyzed Senior Programme) (Fig. 9.5).

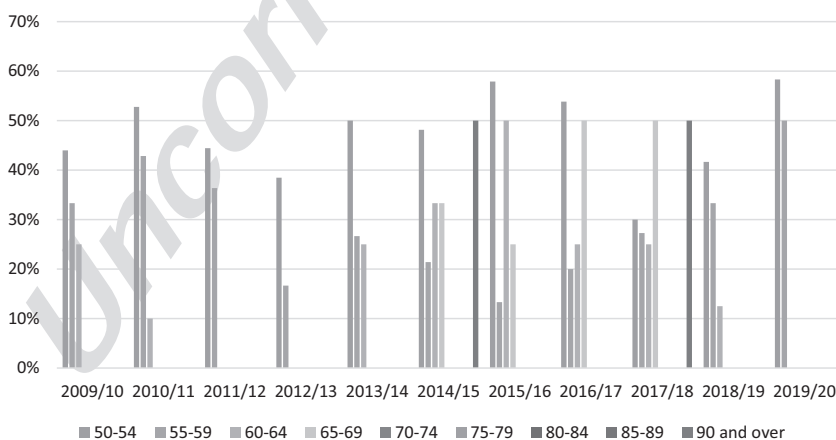


Fig. 9.5. Students over 50 Enrolled in Official Degrees of the UC, 2009/2010–2019/2020. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

On examining a full decade, in spite of the low rates, it is clear that every academic year presents its challenges in overcoming difficulties. This fact gets slightly but continuously better year by year. At the present time, an indirect indicator could be seen as people of older ages from one year to another are slightly higher and there is also an increase in participation in the official degrees offered by the University of Cantabria.

At the master's level, during the period of time between 2009 and 2019, the registration of students over 65 years was eight, consisting of two women and six men. However, on taking into account people over 55, their average within the total student body was about 2%. In this case, as in the doctoral programmes, we should not forget the need to have a prior university qualification to access this level of studies, a situation which is, as we have explained previously, in the present day less usual for women than men in those age groups.

In the case of the master's degree programmes, the percentage of the group aged about 50 and above of the total of the registrations is somewhat greater than the degree level but continues to be very low due to the already cited factors. And, as has also happened to the latter, it has gone down in the last quinquennium. These age segments have been more attracted to the possibilities on offer from the postgraduate studies programmes. However, the trend of female averages taking part in this educational university offer, despite being slightly lower than the male, is roughly within what can be called parity (Table 9.3 and Fig. 9.6).

The average trend of women over 50 taking part in official master's studies has been concentrated on average at about 40%. At the same time, there are more people over 60 years old studying these levels of university studies. The older the average of students over 50 taking part in master's degree studies, the higher the female average (Figs. 9.7–9.9).

Amongst the PhD registrations, in the period 2009–2019, there are seven women researchers older than 65. However, the figures increase if we consider the student body of 50 and over, both at the master's level and the PhD level. In the case of these latter studies, the figures have remained stable in the period of time studied. Over the analyzed chronological framework, the presence of men is greater in the body of researchers of this age group. Women take more active part in the younger age group in the last years. Again, this could reflect a higher educational level of women in the younger generations and then it is precisely these age groups which are the likeliest to make the decision of undertaking the challenge of the highest level studies. This makes access to PhD studies easier for them (Fig 9.10).

In spite of these patterns, at this educational level, the trends of men and women engaged in PhD studies have been drawing curves that have been slightly but continuously converging in the last decade. Male and female average trends are getting closer year after year (Figs. 9.11 and 9.12).

These trends have been increasing the presence of over 50-year-old women in PhD studies and research, reaching parity between women and men in 2018–2019 with averages for each gender group of over 40%. This pattern does not fit well with the process of ageing in the registrations of PhD researchers over 50 in the university, because at these levels of study the age average is quite stable at between

Table 9.3. Students over 50 Years Old Attending Master's Degrees.

	2009/ 2010	2010/ 2011	2011/ 2012	2012/ 2013	2013/ 2014	2014/ 2015	2015/ 2016	2016/ 2017	2017/ 2018	2018/ 2019	2019/ 2020
Women	2	2	10	10	14	5	6	9	7	5	10
Men	5	7	11	12	10	9	12	11	13	14	14
Total	7	9	21	22	24	14	18	20	20	19	24
Percentage of women (%)	28.57	22.22	47.62	45.45	58.33	35.71	33.33	45.00	35.00	26.32	41.67
Percentage of men (%)	71.43	77.78	52.38	54.55	41.67	64.29	66.67	55.00	65.00	73.68	58.33

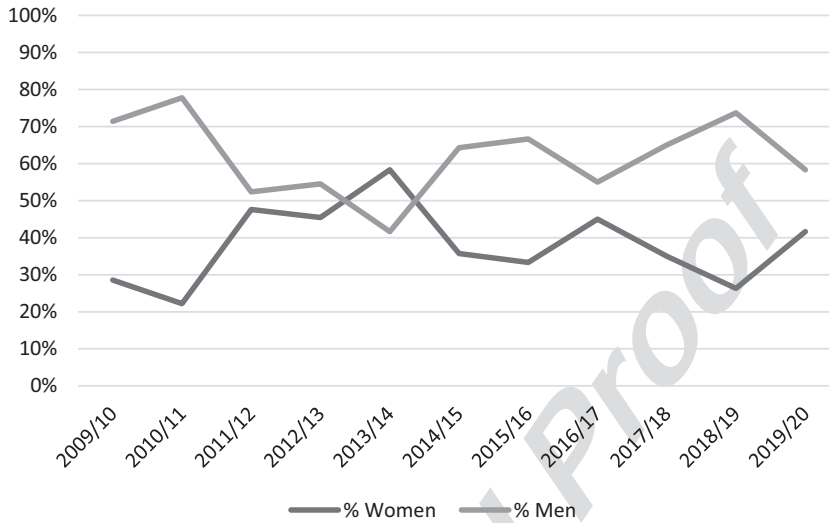


Fig. 9.6. Students over 50 Years Old Attending Master's Degrees.
Source: Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

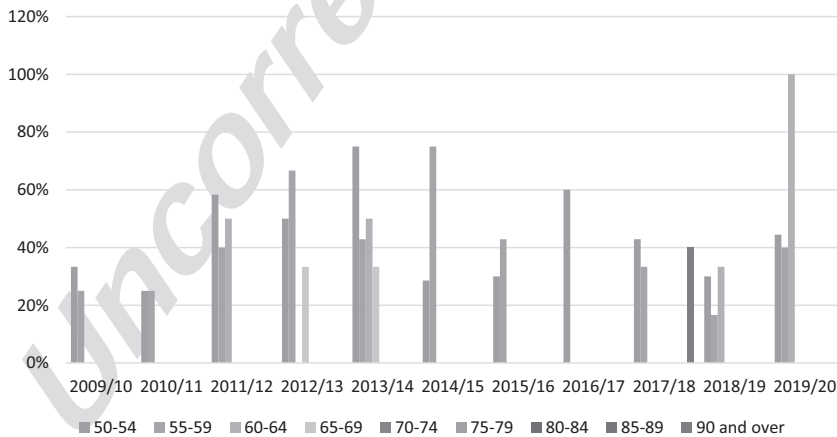


Fig. 9.7. Women in the Master's Degree Programmes, UC 2012–2017. Data Broken Down by Age Group. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

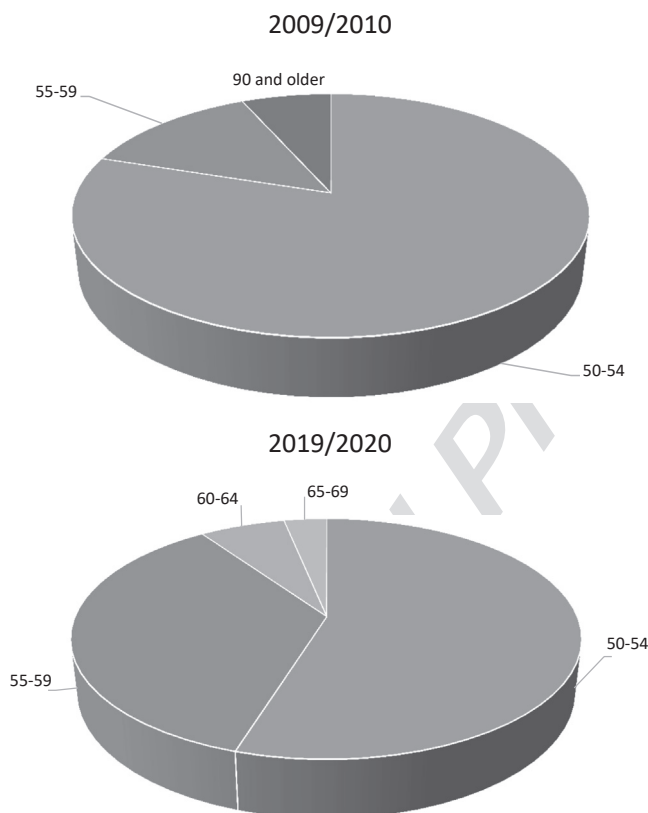


Fig. 9.8. Women in the Master's Degree Programmes, UC 2009/2010–2019/2020. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

50 and 60 years old. However, there has been a slightly increasing average of people over 60 years old taking part in studies at this level (Fig. 9.13).

If we look at official degrees as a whole, in official postgraduate programmes, master's and PhD studies, some common patterns reveal themselves. First, the higher the official educational level, the weaker the participation of women. Second, the need for specific levels of official studies to get access to every university official degree title is a factor of the first quoted pattern that has had an impact on this: the higher the requirements the lower the participation of women. Third, taking into account a diachronic perspective of at least a decade, a clear pattern is that more women have been attracted progressively after the age of 50 by university official programmes and this trend goes in the direction of bringing female and male averages closer together in all the official degree titles offered. Nevertheless, taking

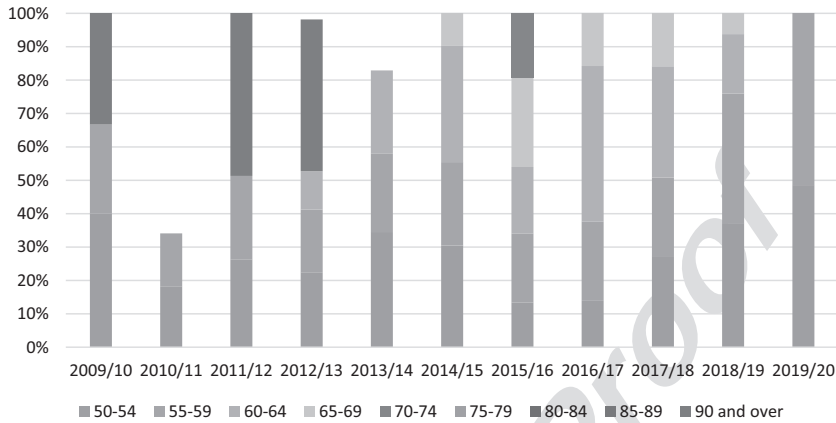


Fig. 9.9. Percentage of Women in Postgraduate Studies, UC 2009–2019. Data Broken Down by Age Group. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

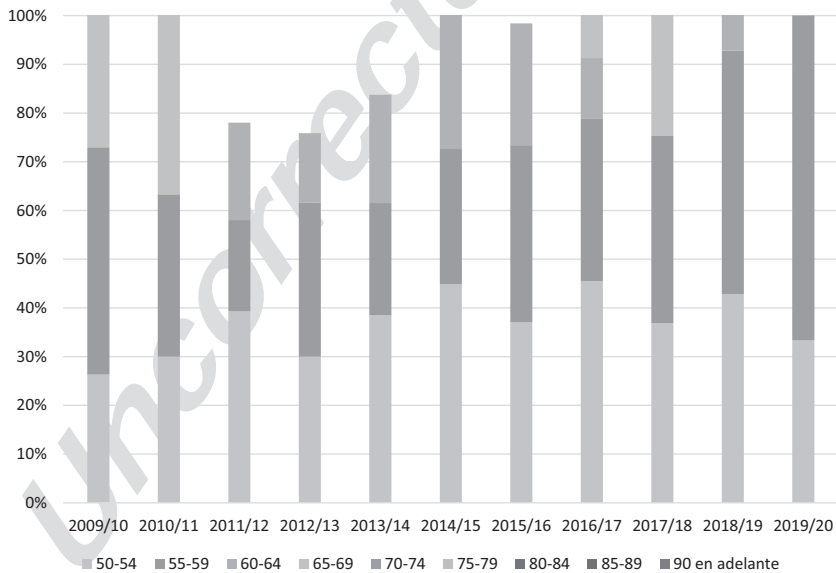


Fig. 9.10. Percentage of Women in PhD Programmes UC, 2009/2010–2019/2020. Data Broken Down by Age Group. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

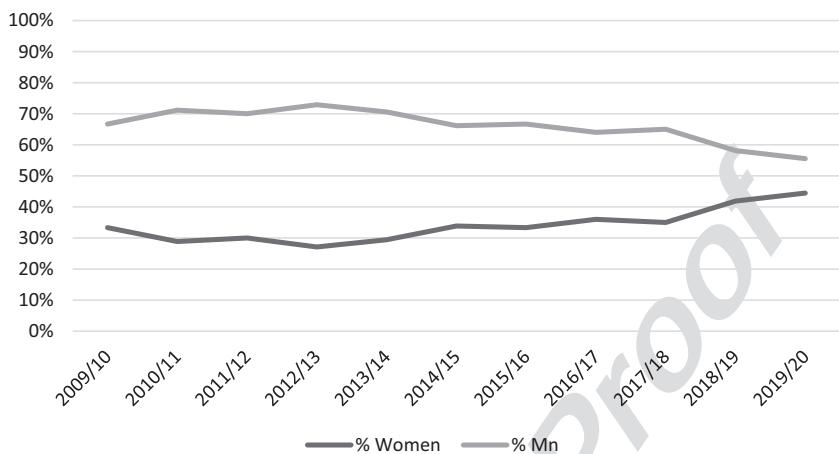


Fig. 9.11. Percentage of Female and Male Trends in PhD Programmes UC, 2009/2010–2019/2020. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

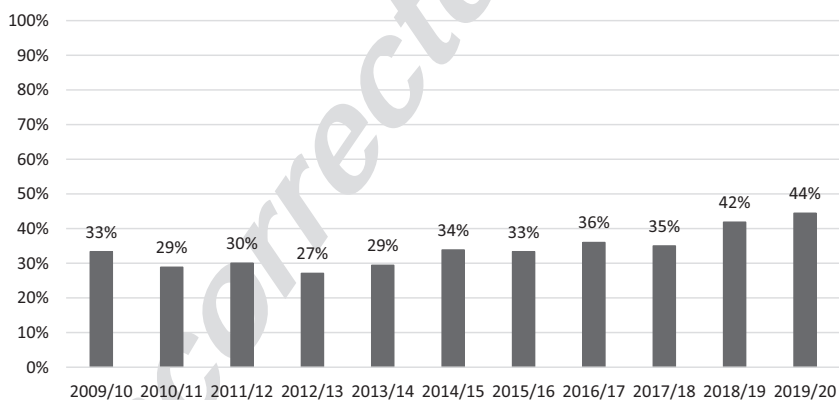


Fig. 9.12. Percentage of Female Trends in PhD Programmes UC, 2009/2010–2019/2020. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

into consideration that things are changing in a different way, the attraction of non-formal offers over official ones is still more evident, and, of these last, the graduate degrees more so than the postgraduate studies, and these latter more than PhD research in official programmes.

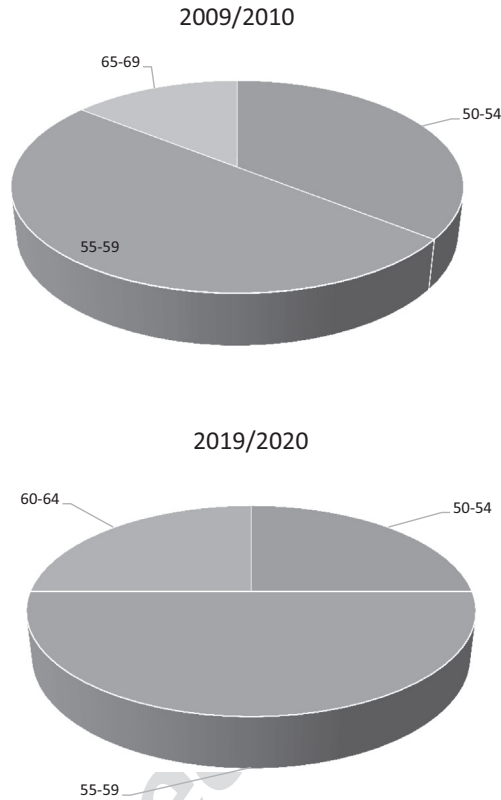


Fig. 9.13. Age Groups of Researchers (Women and Men) in PhD Programmes UC, 2009/2010–2019/2020. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

Non-formal and Open Offers: UNATE and University Summer Courses

The trend whereby older women prevail in less formal educational contexts is also found in other educational initiatives. In Cantabria, the experience of the National University of Third Age Classrooms, the so-called UNATE, concentrates a wide offer of educational activities for the considered *Third Age*.⁸ UNATE began its life in 1978 with not many more than 150 students and has now attracted more than 2,000. UNATE is not a real university but a kind of one for people of all cultural levels in their retirement. This association provides complementary possibilities for those previously described ageing groups.

With its main base in Santander and 10 satellite centres in various localities around Cantabria, the UNATE annual educational and cultural offer maintains



a decentralization of its activities, enabling it to attract older people in different points of the region, from the urban to the rural environments. These satellites that are organized beyond the centre of UNATE in the city of Santander have almost 1,000 people connected to them. According to data provided by the organization, today there are 1,300 (averaging 68 years old) registered at present in Santander, 83% of them being women.⁹

UNATE is an association of older people who seek to promote the cultural socialization of those who wish to improve their education in any area of knowledge. It works to promote the quality of life of older people, encouraging their abilities and their participation in all aspects of social life. In the city of Santander, the activities are organized around seven thematic areas of general content: Studies and Non-formal Research; Health and Physical Upkeep; Occupational Dynamics; New Technologies; Monographic courses; Artistic Activities and Social Action and Living Together. In addition to sustaining its own offer of courses, UNATE makes agreements in order to extend its action, also with the University of Cantabria.

At the present time, it is worth pointing to those made with the University of Cantabria and the UIMP (International University Menéndez Pelayo, the only Spanish State University to develop summer seminars fitting to state global interests) so that its members can register for free in one of the summer courses of the annual programming of both these institutions.

When considering universities' not-so-formal offer to connect with social aims, there is a need to point out another important resource for informal education in the Cantabria region: the Summer Courses Programme offered by the University of Cantabria. Since 1984, every year during the academic summer official holiday, the University of Cantabria offers a full programme of summer courses and open cultural activities that every year reaches more than 6,000 participants, most of them non-regular students of this academic institution.

Nowadays, the summer courses of the University of Cantabria take place between June and September in 19 different towns and villages all around the region of Cantabria and are devoted to dealing with specific topics, lasting from three to five days. Registration does not require any academic qualification and the lectures are taught by specialists of national and international reputation – both scholars and professionals alike.

As a complement to the academic programme, currently made up of about 60 summer courses, there is a rich offer of cultural events, another 40 seasonal free-access events that provide citizens with the opportunity to interact more closely with professors, professionals, artists and social influencers while experiencing this cultural exchange first-hand in historical and natural environmental sites of the region.

This offer also facilitates the access of the rural population of Cantabria to the university non-formal programmes, which is really relevant because the full annual programme offer is academically supervised by a committee of experts that enables the social projection of a university offer prepared directly for wide audiences, students, professionals and citizens, an academic offer that is connected to current social and cultural debates as well as local needs and sensibilities.

With an annual average of direct registrations in the summer courses of about 1,900 people for the last five years (apart from another more than 4,500 attending the free cultural programme), registrations from people over 50 years old in these programmes are noteworthy. In 2019, they represented over 29% of the overall enrolment and the average for the period 2015–2019 was 24.8%, much higher than the average for 2009, which was 7.09%.

Although this may seem to indicate a high increase in the presence of older people in the student body of these courses, a methodological aspect should be taken into account since the reliability of data concerning the age of participants has improved over the last years and therefore the increase in older people's participation cannot be completely validated. On analyzing the participation of women and men in these summer courses, we find common features with some of those found in the non-formal educational offers previously studied (Fig. 9.14).

On the one hand, women's registration is higher than men's, as is the case in all other informal educational programmes already analyzed in the previous pages and, in the case of the summer courses of the University of Cantabria, this has been on the rise in the past few years. On the other hand, the average age of men over 50 years old participating in these programmes is slightly older than women taking part in them. Nevertheless, the proportion of women over 50 enrolled in the period 2015–2019 represented 24.40% of the total registrations, whereas the case of men represented 25.43%. This indicates that, comparatively, the weight of older men's registration in the overall enrolment is higher than the weight of that of older women (Fig. 9.15).

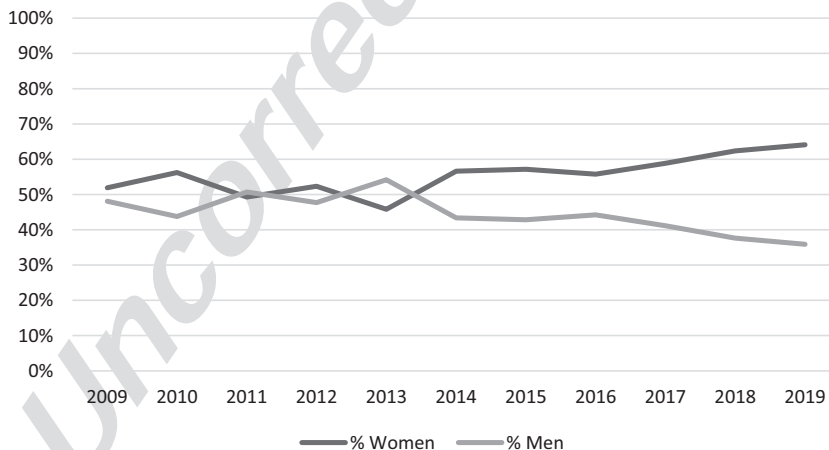


Fig. 9.14. Registrations of Students over 50 Years Old in the Summer Courses of the University of Cantabria, 2009/2010–2019/2020.

Source: Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

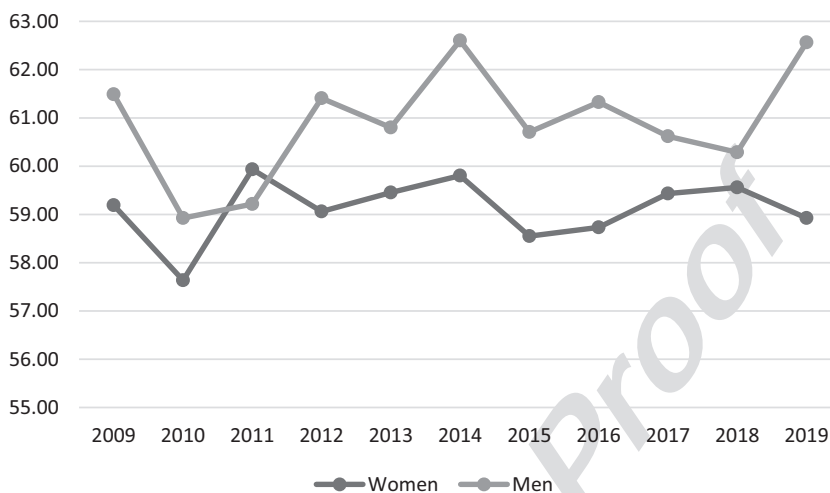


Fig. 9.15. Age Average of Students over 50 Enrolled in the Summer Courses of the University of Cantabria, 2009/2010–2019/2020. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

If we analyze the participation in the summer courses by age groups, we find evidence that the greater participation takes place in the segment of age between 50 and 64 years old, rather than in the range of 65–74 years old as occurs in the Senior Programme. This is more noticeable in the case of women, as the participation of women in the range of 70–84 years old is significantly less than men's enrolment in this academic non-formal offer (Figs. 9.16 and 9.17).

UNATE and University of Cantabria Summer Courses and cultural events programmes are very different in nature, but all of them, in reaching different public sensibilities, converge in offering a really wide offer to social demands for non-formalized education and education throughout life which connects to international aims for social development and the achieving of more cohesive societies in Europe, which also has a direct effect on improving the quality of living after the 50s, beyond professional retirement and in the older age groups.

Because of the lack of special academic qualifications or requirements to take part in these non-formal offers, they are especially attractive to complete educational gaps for older generations who had fewer opportunities to enjoy learning in other previous life stages due to both historical general processes and also personal life opportunities. These non-formal offers are particularly attractive when it comes to responding to women's life expectations in these pointed directions.

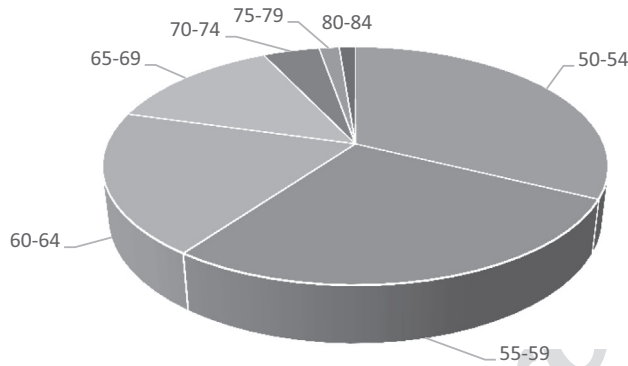


Fig. 9.16. Female Enrolment in the Summer Courses of the University of Cantabria, Broken Down by Age Groups, 2019. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

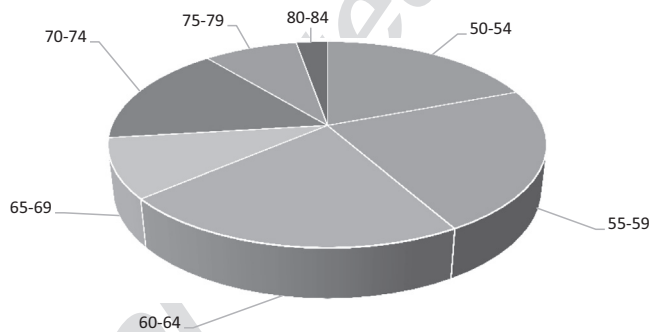


Fig. 9.17. Male Enrolment in the Summer Courses of the University of Cantabria, Broken Down by Age Groups, 2019. *Source:* Authors' full explication based on data provided by the University of Cantabria.

Conclusions

Older women are more determined when it comes to participating in non-formal educational opportunities. As a result of a patriarchal culture that has excluded women from formal educational structures and objectives, they set out from a situation of disadvantage. This limitation was particularly strong during the period following the Spanish Civil War and nowadays affects most fundamentally segments of population of an advanced age.

These more affected age groups represent those people who grew up in Spain during the Franco dictatorship when access to education, particularly university education, was not equally guaranteed for all social groups and there were both contextual and structural limitations to developing educational programmes that women could easily and routinely join, and in most cases they were not at the centre of academic and professional training projects.

When the situation has become more favourable, while living at a time when democratic social and gender policies have opened up educational opportunities for the majority of the population, elderly women take advantage of those offers more fully than men of the same life stage. Lifelong learning policies have a strong gender impact as women forge maturity and old age as a safe educational space.

This research also underlines the increasing relevance of a high-quality educational offer for people, and particularly women with the ability to create their own cultural and intellectual spaces, over 50 years old and in a life project perspective. This is not only a result of the implementation of social policy but also an important challenge of modern societies: to strengthen active programmes to meet diverse needs, educational and otherwise, at different social milestones, at the same time as life expectancy is increasing in Western societies.

Simultaneously, the challenge of improving the educational offer at these levels gives modern societies the chance of overcoming structural social needs linked to historical circumstances. The response of women to this educational offer in Cantabria is a good example of this. One factor that is worth taking into account is the need for a sufficiently diversified offer to give over 50-year-old men and women the chance to choose between formalized and more informal programmes as well as a wide cultural framework to improve life experiences in the last decades of living and also to develop intergenerational cultural exchanges for the benefit of both individual and social life as well as, in the end, to progressively work towards more cohesive and equalitarian societies.

Notes

1. This essay is based on our contribution 'La construcción social de la vejez', in David Cantarero, coord. *Estrategia frente al cambio demográfico 2019–2025*. Boletín Oficial de Cantabria (BOC), 23rd May, 2019, no. 98, pp. 173–195. Retrieved from <https://boc.cantabria.es/boces/verAnuncioAction.do?idAnuBlob=338947>. We are indebted to Josefina Fernández Martínez and Gleysser Salgado Rodríguez for their expert help to process data.
2. Having in mind as non-formal a wide definition rooted in 1970s Philip Coombs' considerations: activities developed with the expressed aim of improving upon learning and educational objectives. On recent theoretical considerations about non-formal education, see Pastor Homs (2001).
3. It has been underlined in this way by recent publications (Gairín et al., 2013) pointing out the conditions for entry into the university system in Spain within the international context for candidates older than 25, 45, and after retirement.
4. According to the INE, those who attended school for 5 years or more without completing EGB, ESO or Elemental Bachelor are considered to have the First

- Grade. Second Grade comprises having completed ESO, EGB, Elemental Bachelor or having the Certificate of Schooling or of Primary Studies. Bachelor (LOE, LOGSE), BUP, Higher Bachelor, COU, PREU, FP medium grade, FP I, *Official industrial* or equivalent, Medium Grade of Music Dance, Certificates of the Official Language Schools, Higher FP, FP II, Industrial Masters or equivalent. Third Grade: with a University Diploma, Architecture or Technical Engineering, University Grade, Degree, Architecture, Engineering, Official University Masters, Medical Specializations or Doctorate.
5. Asociación Estatal de Programas Universitarios para Personas Mayores: <https://www.aepumayores.org/es/contenido/miembros/universidades-socias-de-la-aepum>.
 6. In 2005–2006, there were 31 universities offering these studies and there were 23,000 students involved in them. In 2017–2018, there were 45 universities including these studies in their yearly offer and that course the total amount of students at this level in Spain were 56,994 (Cambero Rivero & Díaz Galván, 2019, p. 109).
 7. On cultural, professional or intellectual competences that should be expressed, see Gairín et al. (2013).
 8. <http://unate.es/> (consulted November 2020).
 9. Data offered by the UNATE in December 2017.

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Q6

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