European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, Pre-published, 2025, pp. 1-30

Dynamics of motivation of older adults in training programmes: A systematic review

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Abstract

While educational programmes for older adults are critical for active ageing, their effectiveness depends on deeply understanding participation drivers beyond simplistic lists of motives. This systematic review synthesises evidence on motivations and barriers, reconceptualising motivation as a dynamic process that evolves from initial impulse to sustained engagement. Following PRISMA guidelines, 31 empirical studies regarding adults aged 50+ were synthesised. A multidimensional framework analysed the temporal evolution and functional axes (instrumental, social, eudaimonic) of motivation. Participation is often initiated by pragmatic instrumental or cognitive goals. However, sustained engagement is driven by social connection and eudaimonic pursuits. Instrumental goals often act as gateways, while barriers encompass multi-layered personal, technological, and structural factors. Motivation is a dynamic journey of pragmatic adaptation and existential expansion. Programmes must challenge 'one-size-fits-all' approaches, adopting flexible, person-centred ecosystems that attract learners with practical benefits while nurturing the evolving social goals crucial for well-being.

Keywords: older adult education, lifelong learning, active ageing, motivation dynamics, systematic review

ISSN 2000-7426

http://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.6220
www.rela.ep.liu.se

Introduction

The right to education stands as one of the fundamental pillars of human development, universally recognised as a catalyst for freedom and dignity. Its conception, however, has evolved from a view limited to the initial stages of life toward a broader paradigm of lifelong learning. This approach, promoted by international organisations, posits that learning is a continuous need and an inalienable right for all people, regardless of age. Seminal UNESCO reports, such as *Learning to Be* (Faure et al., 1972) and *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Delors et al., 1996), laid the groundwork for understanding education not merely as preparation for work, but as a means for the holistic development of the individual. More recently, the Belém (UNESCO, 2009) and Marrakech (UNESCO, 2022) Frameworks for Action have reaffirmed that adult learning and education is an essential component of the right to education and a driver for active citizenship, social cohesion, and sustainable development. This emphasis on lifelong learning aligns directly with the Active Ageing paradigm promoted by organisations like the World Health Organization (2020). This framework encourages continued participation in social, economic, cultural, and civic affairs, viewing education not as a remedial activity, but as a key enabler of health, participation, and security in later life.

This vision of learning as a human right finds its practical application in theories of adult learning. Andragogy, as conceptualised by Knowles (1984), emphasises that older adults are self-directed learners who bring a wealth of life experience to the classroom. Furthermore, education in later life can be a catalyst for transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991), a process where individuals critically reflect on their assumptions and renegotiate their identity and purpose, particularly after significant life events like retirement.

This normative and philosophical consensus is more relevant than ever given the current demographic shift. The progressive increase in the global older population, with a projected 34% growth in the number of people over 60 by 2030 (World Health Organization, 2020), has sparked renewed interest in education as a key tool to promote active aging, social inclusion, and well-being (Gonçalves Gaia et al., 2024). Initiatives like the Universities of the Third Age (*Universités du Troisième Âge*) in 1970s France laid the groundwork for a global movement that aligns with initiatives like the United Nations' 'Decade of Healthy Ageing' (Keating, 2022), demonstrating the powerful potential of education to transform lives (Formosa, 2014; Boulton-Lewis, 2010).

Within the field of later-life education, a significant paradox emerges. Despite the existence of a robust rights-based framework, the rationale for educational programmes targeting older adults remains largely functionalist. Historically, research and policy have been shaped by utilitarian and ageist biases that have relegated older learners to a marginal position (Findsen & Formosa, 2012). Much of the literature has prioritised vocational training or has framed learning in instrumental terms, such as enhancing cognitive health, reducing loneliness, or improving self-esteem (Prohaska et al., 2012; Gardiner et al., 2018). While these outcomes are well-documented, this approach risks reducing education in later life to a merely therapeutic endeavour, overlooking its intrinsic dimensions: enrichment, enjoyment, and reflection as ends in themselves (Schoultz et al., 2022). Evidence from crisis contexts further challenges this narrow view; in Lebanon, for instance, Hachem (2025) demonstrates how later-life education can transcend leisure, serving simultaneously as a source of respite and a means of empowerment. Recognising this broader potential is crucial to overcoming the persistent categorisation of older adults as a 'post-productive' group (Findsen, 2018).

This paper adopts a more profound perspective, framing education in the third age not as a service, but as the continuation of the fundamental human right to lifelong learning. This approach elevates the debate from an 'activity for the elderly' to a matter of equity and dignity. From this viewpoint, learning in later life is revealed as an act of transformational learning (Formosa, 2010), a process through which individuals renegotiate their identity and purpose, especially following disruptive life events like retirement. From a sociological perspective, these events can be understood as threats to 'ontological security', the sense of continuity and order in one's life, prompting older adults to seek out learning as a reflexive way to manage the ensuing anxiety and re-establish routine (Hachem, 2023). This process is inherently andragogical (Knowles, 1984), as older adults are self-directed learners who bring an invaluable wealth of life experience that educational institutions must recognise and value.

Furthermore, the impact of these programmes transcends the individual sphere to strengthen the social fabric. To ignore older learners is to squander an immense reserve of social, cultural, and experiential capital (Jarvis, 2008). Far from being mere instructional spaces, educational programmes for older adults are vital nodes for the creation of social capital (Findsen et al., 2011), building networks of mutual support that effectively counteract isolation. Indeed, the experience of 'relational support' and the development of a 'sense of community' within the classroom are often highlighted by participants as core intrinsic values of their educational journey (Schoultz et al., 2022). By fostering active citizenship and volunteerism, these programmes empower older adults to contribute their knowledge to society (Ahmad et al., 2022), actively challenging negative ageist stereotypes and building more inclusive, participatory communities.

Despite these benefits, a significant gap remains. The understanding of what motivates older adults to participate in education is often descriptive and theoretically weak, relying on 'simplistic representations' that fail to capture the complexity of their needs (Cuenca, 2011). Motivation, for instance, is not a simple, intentional choice but a complex interplay between individual agency and social structures. This decision-making process involves a constant negotiation between personal motivations (the driving forces) and a series of barriers (the restraining forces) that can either inhibit or redirect the desire to learn (Cross, 1981). Decisions are therefore often guided non-consciously by one's class habitus and life history (Hachem, 2023). This interplay is shaped by numerous multi-layered barriers, from dispositional factors like a lack of confidence, to situational challenges like health issues, and structural hurdles like ageism or the digital divide (Formosa, 2019). These barriers are not merely obstacles; they actively interact with an individual's motivations, either dampening initial enthusiasm, altering learning goals, or in some cases, even strengthening resolve to overcome them.

Therefore, this systematic review goes beyond a mere inventory of motivations. By analysing the evidence through the dual lens of individual rights and community development, this work seeks to re-centre the voice and agency of the older learner. Our objective is to review previous evidence that can serve as a basis for the design of policies and educational programmes that are truly inclusive, empowering, and transformative. To this end, we will synthesise and interpret the existing evidence on the motivations and barriers of older adults, thereby providing valuable tools for educators and policymakers to guarantee their full participation in society.

Methods

This systematic review was conducted and reported in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021).

Development of research questions

Exploratory review questions were developed to explore the motivations and barriers presented by older people participating in training programmes. In line with the research objectives mentioned above, the review was conducted to answer the following key questions: what are the primary motivations of older people who participate in training programmes?; how do these motivations vary according to the type of training programme (e.g., formal/informal, digital/face-to-face?; what are the main barriers that hinder the fulfilment of these needs and motivations?

To answer the key questions, the following elements are identified below: Population (P): Older people participating in training programmes (of any kind). Intervention (I): Participation in training programmes (in this case, 'intervention' is the condition under which needs and motivations are being explored). Comparison (C): Older people participating in different types of learning programmes (e.g. digital vs. non-digital, formal vs. informal). Outcome (O): Description and characterisation of motivations (e.g. learning, personal growth, social connectedness, sense of purpose) and barriers (e.g. economic, health, social, attitudinal) that can either inhibit or redirect the desire to learn.

Identification of relevant studies

A systematic search was conducted across four electronic databases to identify relevant empirical studies: EBSCOhost, PubMed, Web of Science and Scopus. The search was not limited by publication date and included all articles retrieved up to October 2025.

The search strategy was developed in consultation with a research librarian and combined keywords related to four core concepts: (1) a population of older adults, (2) an educational context, (3) motivations, and (4) barriers, as detailed in Table 1. The search terms within each concept were combined using the OR operator, and the four concepts were linked using the AND operator. This multi-faceted approach was designed to retrieve highly relevant articles that addressed all key dimensions of our research questions. The full search string was adapted for the specific syntax of each database. Additionally, a supplementary search was conducted on the websites of scientific journals using the same search terms, and the reference lists of all included articles were examined to identify any further relevant studies.

Table 1. Search strategy concepts and keywords

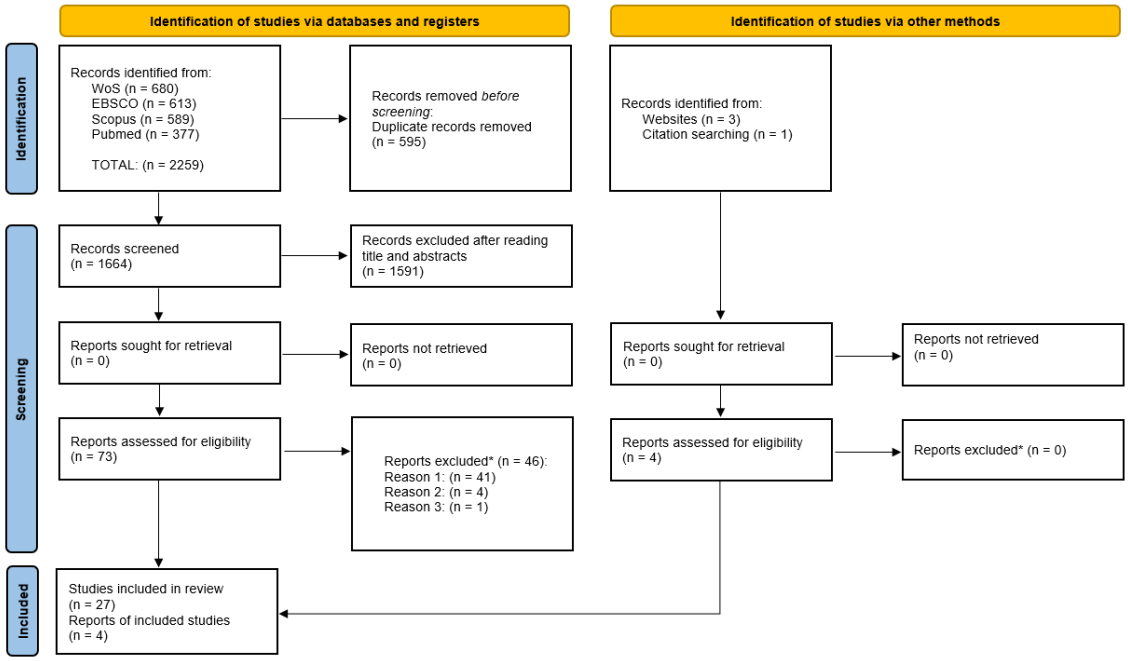
Concept	Keywords searched
1. *Population*	'Older Adults' OR 'Senior Citizens' OR 'Elderly' OR 'Aging' OR 'Seniors' OR 'Older People'
2. *Context/Intervention*	'Adult Education' OR 'Lifelong Learning' OR 'Learning Programs' OR 'Education Programs' OR 'Learning Activities'
3. *Motivations*	'Motivation' OR 'Motives' OR 'Interests' OR 'Reasons' OR 'Desires' OR 'Expectations' OR 'Goals' OR 'Aspirations'
4. *Barriers*	'Barriers' OR 'Requirements' OR 'Demands' OR 'Gaps' OR 'Difficulties' OR 'Challenges'

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Articles were selected according to the following inclusion criteria: (a) empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods) investigating motivations of older adults participating in training programmes; (b) participants: people aged 50 years or older (the definition of 'older person' should be explicit in the study); (c) training programmes: any type of educational or training programme aimed at older people (formal or informal, face-to-face or online); (d) language: articles written in English or Spanish. We excluded: (a) studies that focus exclusively on adults with dementia or other cognitive conditions that prevent their active participation in training programmes; (b) individual case studies without aggregated data; (c) literature reviews, editorials, commentaries and letters to the editor; (d) studies that do not provide information on participants' motivations.

The initial database search yielded 2259 articles. After removing 595 duplicates, 1664 articles were screened by title and abstract, of which 1591 were excluded. The full texts of the remaining 73 articles were assessed for eligibility, leading to the exclusion of 46 studies. An additional four records were identified for the review, including three from websites of scientific journals and one through citation searching. In total, 31 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the synthesis. The complete study selection process is detailed in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the literature search (authors' own figure)



* Reason 1: (do not explore the motivations); reason 2 (review articles): reason 3 (participants under the age of 50)

Quality assessment

The methodological quality of the included studies was critically appraised to ensure the robustness of the evidence base. Given the methodological diversity of the selected literature, which encompasses qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method designs, the Mixed Methods Assessment Tool (MMAT), version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018), was used. This specialised tool was chosen for its unique ability to comprehensively and

consistently evaluate diverse types of empirical studies. The MMAT is structured into five design categories: (1) qualitative research, (2) randomised controlled trials, (3) non-randomised quantitative studies, (4) descriptive quantitative studies, and (5) mixed methods studies. For each category, the tool provides five specific criteria that allow for the assessment of study design rigor, methodological validity, and potential risk of bias. To ensure objectivity, the reliability of the quality assessment process was rigorously examined. Two authors independently applied the MMAT tool to each of the 31 included studies. The initial level of agreement was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient. The overall kappa coefficient was $\kappa = 0.85$, indicating a 'near perfect' level of agreement that significantly exceeds what would be expected by chance (Landis & Koch, 1977). This strong consistency supports the reliability of the study assessment and subsequent synthesis of the evidence.

Following this initial phase, the two reviewers met to discuss each item where there was a discrepancy. The vast majority of disagreements were resolved through a consensus-based dialogue, which involved a joint re-examination of the relevant sections of the article in question until a unified rating was reached. In the few cases where a consensus could not be achieved, a third author served as an arbitrator to make the final decision. This protocol of peer evaluation and conflict resolution ensures that the quality ratings assigned to each study are the result of a deliberative and rigorous process.

In accordance with the recommendations of the MMAT developers (Hong et al., 2018), the assessment was not used to generate a summative quality score or to exclude studies based on a quantitative threshold. Instead, the assessment was used to inform the narrative synthesis of the evidence, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the methodological strengths and limitations of the included literature. This approach allows the findings to be interpreted with due caution, especially in those studies where potential risks of bias were identified. The complete and detailed results of this quality assessment are presented transparently in Table 2 (see Appendices).

Data extraction and synthesis

A structured data extraction form was developed to collect key information on study characteristics (author, year, country, design), participant demographics, and all findings related to motivations, needs, and barriers.

To move beyond a simple descriptive list and understand the *dynamics* of motivation, we developed and applied a deductive thematic synthesis framework. This multidimensional framework was constructed by integrating established theoretical concepts from the fields of adult learning and motivation psychology, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of the evidence. This framework is structured along two intersecting axes designed to analyse the data comprehensively. The first, the Temporal Axis, was conceptualised to capture the evolution of motivation over time, distinguishing between initial Impulses (pre-enrolment reasons), Processual Experiences (motivations sustained during the course), and Finalities (desired outcomes). This temporal distinction is inspired by established models of goal-setting and learner journeys within adult education (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2018). Concurrently, the second axis, the Domain Axis, categorised the nature of these motivations based on a well-established typology in motivation research. This axis includes four key dimensions: instrumental, cognitive, and social factors, which are widely recognised in education literature (Urhahne & Wijnia, 2023), alongside the concept of eudaimonic motivation (personal growth and purpose), which is rooted in positive psychology and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Adopting this deductive approach allowed us to structure the synthesis around key

theoretical dimensions of motivation and thereby directly address our research questions concerning its dynamic and multifaceted nature.

In parallel, all information related to barriers to participation were extracted and synthesised thematically. These barriers were inductively coded based on the evidence and subsequently grouped into broader, conceptually coherent categories. This process identified three overarching domains of barriers, based on Cross' (1981) typology: personal and health, technological, and structural/institutional, which are presented in the results section.

Results

Table 3 summarises the main descriptive characteristics of the 31 studies that met the inclusion criteria for this review, which included a total of 12,486 participants (see Appendices).

Year of publication and location

The studies included in the review were published between 2002 and 2024, with the oldest being Silverstein et al. (2002) and the most recent being Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano (2024). Most research was conducted in Europe (n=13), with five studies in Spain (Aparicio, 2014; Cuenca, 2011; Solé et al., 2005; Villar & Celdrán, 2014; Villar et al., 2010), two in Poland (Klimczak-Pawlak & Kossakowska-Pisarek, 2018; Kuklewicz & King, 2018), two in the United Kingdom (Findsen et al., 2011, Roscoe et al., 2017), two in Sweden (Bjursell, 2019; Schoultz et al., 2022), one in Switzerland (Ackermann & Seifert, 2021) and one in the Czech Republic (Nováková & Lorenzová, 2020). Asia was the second most represented continent (n=8), highlighting three studies conducted in Hong Kong (Leung et al., 2006; Tam, 2012; Tam & Chui, 2015), one in China (Xiong & Zuo, 2019), one in Malaysia (Nor, 2011), one in the Philippines (Escolar Chua & de Guzman, 2014), one in Taiwan (Mulenga & Liang, 2008) and one in Lebanon (Hachem, 2023). Six studies were conducted in North America: three in the United States (Kim & Merriam, 2004; Silverstein et al., 2002; Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano, 2024) and three in Canada (Narushima et al., 2013; Narushima et al., 2018; Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2004). One study in South America, specifically in Brazil (Cachioni et al., 2014). Finally, three studies were found in Australia (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2006; Boulton-Lewis & Buys, 2015; Tyler et al., 2020).

Sample characteristics

Sample sizes in the reviewed studies varied considerably, from a maximum of 4,559 participants (Villar & Celdrán, 2014) to a minimum of 7 (Kuklewicz & King, 2018), with a median of 77 participants. The age range most frequently repeated in the studies analysed was 60-69 years. Six studies included people aged 50-65 years in their sample (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2006; Klimczak-Pawlak & Kossakowska-Pisarek, 2018; Kuklewicz & King, 2018; Mulenga & Liang, 2008; Silverstein et al., 2002; Tam, 2012), while nine investigations involved people aged 80 years or older (Ackermann & Seifert, 2021; Aparicio, 2014; Cachioni et al., 2014; Narushima et al., 2018; Roscoe et al., 2017; Silverstein et al., 2002; Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano, 2024; Tyler et al., 2020; Villar et al., 2010).

In terms of gender, most studies (n=21) reported a higher proportion of females than males among their participants, with one study being exclusively female (Roscoe et al.,

2017). Only one study reported the participation of more men (Nor, 2011), two studies reported an equal distribution between women and men (Ackermann & Seifert, 2021; Findsen et al., 2011). Three studies did not specify the number of participants of each gender (Tam, 2012; Silverstein et al., 2002; Villar & Celdrán, 2014).

Methods used for data collection

All the studies provide their results based on the responses expressed by the older participants. There are differences in the method used to extract information in each study, some use in-depth or semi-structured interviews (Aparicio, 2014; Boulton-Lewis & Buys, 2015; Findsen et al., 2011; Hachem, 2023; Kuklewicz & King, 2018; Narushima et al., 2018; Roscoe et al., 2017; Schoultz et al., 2022; Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano, 2024; Tyler et al., 2020), while others only use questionnaires (Ackermann & Seifert, 2021; Cuenca, 2011; Leung et al, 2006; Nováková & Lorenzová, 2020; Mulenga & Liang, 2008; Tam & Chui, 2015; Tam, 2012; Villar et al., 2010). Three studies employed the joint use of interviews and questionnaires (Cachioni et al., 2014; Klimczak-Pawlak & Kossakowska-Pisarek, 2018; Nor, 2011; Solé et al., 2005), and one extracted information from focus group discussions (Escolar Chua & de Guzman, 2014). Finally, several studies employ surveys (Kim & Merriam, 2004; Narushima et al., 2013; Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2004; Villar & Celdrán, 2014), one conducts telephone interviews (Silverstein et al., 2002), another one conducts postal surveys (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2006), and one employs a combination of surveys and narratives (Bjursell, 2019; Xiong & Zuo, 2019).

The dynamics of motivation

The synthesis of 31 included studies reveals a rich and multifaceted landscape of older adults' motivations for participating in educational programmes. By applying our multidimensional coding framework, which distinguishes between temporal phases, namely impulse, process, and finality, and functional domains, including cognitive, social, instrumental, and eudaimonic motivation, we were able to move beyond a mere inventory. Instead, we identified three overarching and interconnected themes that capture the dynamic nature of older learners' engagement. The first, the evolution of cognitive motivation, encompasses the progression from a prophylactic need to an existential resource. The second, the structural role of social motivation, provides the communal scaffolding that supports learning. The third, the instrumental impulse and the eudaimonic finality, describes a continuum from pragmatic problem-solving to a profound experience of personal flourishing.

The evolution of cognitive motivation

Older adults' participation in educational programmes is often driven by a prominent cognitive motivation that manifests in two main facets. The first is a pragmatic motive, frequently framed by participants in preventive terms, such as the desire to 'keep the mind active' (Aparicio, 2014; Kim & Merriam, 2004). The second is a purely intrinsic motive, centred on the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. This initial impulse represents not merely a passive interest but an active engagement in learning, which participants perceive as beneficial for maintaining mental vitality, although current evidence reflects perceptions rather than demonstrated preventive effects.

Quantitative findings from studies underscore the importance of cognitive motives. For example, Solé et al. (2005) found that maintaining mental activity was the highest-rated motive among their participants, and Cachioni et al. (2014) reported that 57% of

participants cited improving general knowledge as a key reason for engagement. These results, however, derive from individual samples and should be interpreted within their methodological limits. Cognitive motivation is often framed in preventative terms, reflecting a deliberate effort to mitigate age-related cognitive decline (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2006) and a practical necessity to avoid social exclusion in an increasingly globalised world (Klimczak-Pawlak & Kossakowska-Pisarek, 2018).

In a study of MOOC participants, Xiong and Zuo (2019) identified improving cognition as a particularly salient motivation among older learners, more prominent than in other learning contexts. Their findings also revealed an age-related shift in motivational focus: younger-old adults, aged 60 to 74, tend to emphasise practical problem-solving related to life transitions, whereas older-old participants, aged 75 and above, are more frequently motivated by the intrinsic pleasure of learning and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Further comparative research is needed to determine whether these patterns are consistent across different cultural and educational settings.

Alongside the preventative goal, older adults exhibit a purely intrinsic curiosity, described as a 'desire to learn and get to know things' (Nováková & Lorenzová, 2020) or the 'joy of learning' (Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2004), reflecting engagement for its own inherent satisfaction rather than external utility. While the initial impulse may be goal-oriented, our synthesis reveals a notable evolution as participants immerse themselves in the learning environment. Motivation transcends the original aim and becomes deeply embedded in the cognitive process itself. The focus shifts from the outcomes of learning, such as maintaining a healthier brain, to the intrinsic value of the learning activity. Schoultz et al. (2022) provide a nuanced perspective, highlighting the experience of generating 'new ideas and expanded perspectives' and the 'reflective process' as intrinsically valuable. For their participants, the value extended beyond the acquisition of knowledge to encompass discussion, reflection, and intellectual engagement with peers and instructors. This appreciation for intellectual challenge and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake (Villar et al., 2010; Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano, 2024) characterises this second phase of cognitive motivation.

The structural role of social motivation

Beyond cognitive stimulation, our synthesis reveals that social motivation is not merely an incidental benefit of lifelong learning but often functions as the foundational structure upon which the entire educational experience is built. It operates as a primary impulse for participation, a critical component of the learning process itself, and a key eudaimonic outcome. This structural role underscores that, for many older adults, learning is inherently a communal act.

A powerful initial impulse for seeking educational opportunities is the fundamental human need for social connection (Bjursell, 2019; Aparicio, 2014). This drive often emerges as a response to, or a defense against, social changes associated with aging, such as retirement, widowhood, or geographic relocation, which can lead to shrinking social networks and isolation (Hachem, 2023). For many learners, the social impulse represents a primary motivator, expressed as a desire to 'increase social interaction' (Cachioni et al., 2014) or establish 'social contact' (Cuenca, 2011), culminating in the profound benefit of 'making more friends' (Villar et al., 2010). In some studies, the need for connection ranks second only to cognitive interest (Kim & Merriam, 2004) and appears particularly pronounced among individuals with lower prior educational attainment, for whom social interaction can outweigh purely academic goals (Cachioni et al., 2014). This aligns with broader evidence indicating that lower educational levels predict stronger motivations across multiple domains (Villar et al., 2010). However, the primacy of this impulse is not

universal. In the highly academic context of the U3A in Prague, ‘establishing new relations’ was the least cited motivation (11%), suggesting that when cognitive goals are particularly salient, social needs may become secondary (Nováková & Lorenzová, 2020). Nonetheless, for a significant portion of older learners, the educational setting remains primarily a space for building new social capital.

Once participants are enrolled, social motivation evolves from a simple impulse to an integral part of the learning process. The social environment becomes the scaffolding that supports and enhances cognitive engagement. Schoultz et al. (2022) illustrate this phenomenon, finding that the value of ‘relational support’ and the ‘sense of community’ was experienced during the educational activity itself. For their participants, group discussions about a book were considered as intrinsically valuable as reading the book itself, highlighting that learning occurs with and through others. This finding is reinforced by studies emphasising the importance of group work, peer learning, and the role of the instructor in fostering a supportive, interactive atmosphere (Cuenca, 2011; Solé et al., 2005). In this context, social interaction is not a distraction from learning but a pedagogical method through which knowledge is co-constructed, perspectives are broadened, and engagement is sustained.

The ultimate outcome of sustained social engagement transcends mere acquaintance, culminating in a profound sense of belonging and community. In a small qualitative study of particularly vulnerable older adults, participants described classroom participation as a ‘circle of camaraderie’ and reported improvements in well-being. These findings illustrate potential psychosocial benefits, though they are based on a limited sample and context-specific data (Narushima et al., 2018). This eudaimonic finality is explicitly recognised by learners, with ‘making more friends’ and ‘increasing personal and life satisfaction’ ranking among the most highly valued perceived benefits of participation (Villar et al., 2010). This newly formed community also serves a vital identity-affirming function, allowing individuals to reconnect with a peer group that shares similar values and life experiences, thereby reinforcing their sense of self and social status in post-work life (Hachem, 2023). Thus, social motivation completes its trajectory, evolving from an initial need for contact to the construction of a meaningful community that sustains both well-being and identity.

The instrumental impulse and the eudaimonic finality

Ultimately, the evolution of cognitive motivation reaches a deeper eudaimonic and existential finality. Learning becomes more than an activity; it transforms into a mechanism for navigating the challenges of aging and reaffirming one’s identity. For vulnerable older adults, it functions as a ‘therapeutic mechanism of self-help’ that manages the dissonance between an active mind and an aging body, turning the act of learning into an exercise of resilience (Narushima et al., 2018). Furthermore, in the face of major life transitions, such as retirement, learning serves to restore a sense of ‘ontological security’ by providing new routines, purpose, and a framework for redefining a positive identity (Hachem, 2023). In this final stage, the cognitive drive fulfils its ultimate purpose: not merely to preserve the mind, but to enrich the self and affirm one’s continued place in the world.

For many older adults, the initial motivation to learn is profoundly instrumental, responding to concrete needs or practical problems. This impulse centres on acquiring a toolkit for navigating the demands of contemporary life and the challenges of aging. A dominant driver in this domain is the need to adapt to a technologically evolving world. Studies of ICT training reveal that motivation is rarely about mastering technology for its own sake; rather, it is driven by high ‘personal utility’, such as connecting with family,

managing finances, or pursuing hobbies (Tyler et al., 2020; Roscoe et al., 2017). This problem-solving orientation acts as a powerful catalyst. In a study of MOOC participants, problem-solving related to health, retirement, or social changes was the most cited motivation (44.9%), particularly among younger-old adults in transitional life phases (Xiong & Zuo, 2019). Crucially, Ackermann and Seifert (2021) found that while multiple motivations were present at enrolment, only instrumental motivation—the perceived practical applicability of knowledge—significantly predicted sustained attendance. These findings suggest that perceived utility is associated with higher engagement; instrumental motives may therefore contribute to sustained participation, although causal mechanisms cannot be established from the available cross-sectional data. Instrumental motivation may also take an altruistic form, manifesting as a desire to acquire knowledge to help others or contribute to family and community, a theme consistently observed across diverse cultural contexts (Cachioni et al., 2014; Escolar Chua & de Guzman, 2014; Xiong & Zuo, 2019).

Some studies report a progression in which initial instrumental motives are complemented over time by eudaimonic outcomes. However, the evidence is descriptive and heterogeneous, and this trajectory is not universal. Even when participants enroll with a single practical goal, such as learning a language for travel, the experience is enriched by the cognitive and social dynamics of the learning environment. The challenge of acquiring a new skill provides intrinsic cognitive satisfaction (Kim & Merriam, 2004), while the camaraderie of the classroom builds social capital (Schoultz et al., 2022). In this transformative middle phase, the instrumental goal serves as the entry point, yet the inherent rewards of cognitive and social processes gradually shift the learner's focus from purely utilitarian outcomes to the holistic value of the experience.

The culmination of this journey is the attainment of a eudaimonic finality, where learning transcends its practical function and becomes a core component of well-being, purpose, and self-realisation. Participants find a renewed sense of meaning following the cessation of professional roles. The benefits reported in this phase are deeply personal and existential, including an 'increase in personal and life satisfaction', a feeling of being 'more useful,' and an enhanced 'joy in life' (Villar et al., 2010). The act of learning contributes to a positive self-concept and is strongly associated with successful aging, life satisfaction, and happiness (Tam & Chui, 2015). Ultimately, this finality represents a profound redefinition of self: the instrumental need to learn how to navigate older age transforms into the discovery that learning is a way of living fully. This transformation is powerfully captured for vulnerable older adults in the phrase, 'I learn, therefore I am' (Narushima et al., 2018, p. 1). In this final stage, learning ceases to be merely a tool for adaptation and becomes an affirmation of a vital, growing, and purposeful self.

Barriers to participation

Across the reviewed studies, a consistent range of barriers was identified as limiting or preventing older adults' participation in educational activities. According to Cross' (1981) typology, these barriers can be classified into three interconnected categories: personal and health, technological, and structural and institutional barriers.

Personal and health barriers

The systematic review revealed a recurrent pattern of personal and health-related barriers that constrain older adults' participation in educational activities. These findings can be categorised into three principal domains: health-related barriers, psychological and dispositional barriers, and situational or family-related barriers.

Health issues, pertaining to both the individual and their family members, emerged as one of the most significant and frequently cited barriers. Poor personal health, encompassing physical, mental, and emotional well-being, was found to be a strong predictor of obstacles to learning (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2006). Several studies identified 'personal health problems' or general 'age or health reasons' as a primary deterrent for non-participation (Tam, 2012; Villar & Celdrán, 2014). Furthermore, the health of family members presented a significant situational barrier, with caregiving responsibilities frequently limiting older adults' ability to engage in learning activities (Tam, 2012; Tam & Chui, 2015). Cognitive limitations, particularly self-perceived memory problems associated with aging, were consistently reported as a major challenge by learners (Escolar Chua & de Guzman, 2014; Kuklewicz & King, 2018). However, an important nuance was highlighted by Ackermann & Seifert (2021), whose findings suggest that while health barriers are critical in the initial decision to enrol, they do not significantly impact the frequency of attendance among those already participating in a programme.

Beyond physical health, multiple psychological and dispositional factors emerged as salient barriers across studies. A lack of self-confidence and feelings of insecurity were prominent dispositional barriers, particularly among those who did not participate in education (Aparicio, 2014; Tam & Chui, 2015). This category also includes the 'fear of being judged' (Boulton-Lewis & Buys, 2015), anxiety related to ageism in intergenerational settings (Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano, 2024), and negative emotions such as frustration and anxiety experienced during the learning process itself (Klimczak-Pawlak & Kossakowska-Pisarek, 2018). Specifically in the context of technology, high anxiety and low self-efficacy were found to hinder engagement (Tyler et al., 2020). Finally, some studies report apathy (Aparicio, 2014) and, in certain surveys, a substantial proportion of non-participants indicate they do not perceive formal education as necessary. However, Villar & Celdrán (2014) document a variety of reasons for non-participation across a large national sample rather than a single dominant cause.

Personal life circumstances and competing responsibilities constitute a third major category of barriers. Family obligations, particularly the responsibility of caring for grandchildren, were consistently identified as a significant barrier that limits the time available for personal development and education (Aparicio, 2014; Escolar Chua & de Guzman, 2014; Silverstein et al., 2002; Villar & Celdrán, 2014). Consequently, a general 'lack of time' was a key situational barrier reported by active older adults, indicating that learning must compete with other meaningful life activities and be perceived as a worthwhile endeavor (Boulton-Lewis & Buys, 2015).

Technological barriers

Technology-related challenges emerged as multifaceted barriers encompassing digital competence, access, and attitudinal dimensions of technology adoption. Difficulties with the use of technology, specifically computers and the internet, were explicitly noted as a primary challenge for older adult learners in degree programmes (Nor, 2011). This skills gap is further compounded by issues of access, often referred to as the 'digital divide', which can exclude older adults with limited internet connectivity or low digital competence from participating in online opportunities (Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano, 2024). The existence of this barrier is implicitly confirmed by studies where learning Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is a primary motivation. In these cases, the desire to 'move with the times' and not be 'left behind' is a direct response to the perceived barrier of technological exclusion (Roscoe et al., 2017).

Beyond practical skills, the literature highlights a significant psychological dimension to technological barriers. Research by Tyler et al. (2020) revealed a complex

interaction of motivational factors where high anxiety and low self-efficacy were associated with a lower intention to use technology, even when its utility was recognised. This suggests that the barrier is not merely a lack of technical knowledge but is deeply intertwined with emotional and confidence-related factors. Although a few studies report low levels of technophobia in certain highly educated or professionally active cohorts, the broader literature finds substantial evidence of frustration, anxiety, and low self-efficacy related to technology among many older adult groups. Overall, the influence of technological barriers is highly context-dependent, varying according to prior educational experience, professional background, and perceived usefulness.

In a study of highly educated, and often still employed, older students, technology was not found to be a significant barrier to participation (Silverstein et al., 2002). This suggests that prior educational attainment and professional experience may mitigate technological challenges. Ultimately, many studies indicate that perceived personal utility and motivational factors often matter as much or more than raw technical skill, older adults are more likely to adopt technology when they see a clear, personally relevant use for it. The findings of Tyler et al. (2020) strongly indicate that a lack of perceived personal utility is the greatest barrier; older adults are less likely to engage with technology if they do not see a direct and valuable application for it in their own lives, regardless of their technical proficiency.

Structural and institutional barriers

In addition to individual-level factors, substantial structural and institutional barriers were identified as shaping the educational opportunities available to older adults. These barriers are not inherent to the individual but are created by the policies, practices, and environments of educational providers and society at large. They can be broadly grouped into financial and logistical constraints, informational and programmatic shortcomings, and issues related to institutional culture.

Financial constraints were consistently reported as important barriers, particularly among older adults from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The cost of participation was cited as a barrier (Boulton-Lewis & Buys, 2015), and the availability of financial support was found to be a crucial determinant of continued engagement for working-class learners (Findsen et al., 2011). Logistical issues related to physical access were also prominent. A robust quantitative finding from Ackermann & Seifert (2021) demonstrated that greater physical distance from the institution was significantly associated with a lower frequency of attendance. This is supported by qualitative findings identifying challenges with transportation, parking, and navigating the campus as key accessibility barriers (Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano, 2024). Furthermore, inflexible scheduling and the timing of courses were highlighted as major obstacles, especially for those who may still be working or have other fixed commitments (Silverstein et al., 2002).

A frequently cited barrier is the lack of centralised, clear and accessible information about available programmes and enrolment options, a problem documented across qualitative and quantitative studies and linked to lower initial uptake. Potential learners face difficulties in finding centralised information about available programmes (Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano, 2024), and a general lack of awareness about the existence of these educational opportunities prevents participation from the outset (Aparicio, 2014). The nature of the programmes offered also acts as a barrier. A lack of interesting or desired courses was a primary institutional reason for non-participation (Tam, 2012; Tam & Chui, 2015). Finally, bureaucratic hurdles, such as complicated enrolment procedures, restrictive admission requirements, and administrative staff unfamiliar with options for

older learners, create frustrating obstacles that can deter even motivated individuals (Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano, 2024).

The institutional culture itself emerged as one of the most deeply embedded structural barriers. Several findings pointed to an environment that can be unwelcoming or ill-suited for older learners. Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano (2024) highlighted ageism as an underlying problem, reporting older adults' anxieties based on past experiences of exclusion and the critical need for universities to actively combat an institutional 'culture of ageism'. This may lead some older adults to perceive university as 'too difficult' (Aparicio, 2014), creating an intimidating climate; studies recommend institutional actions (accessibility, flexible entry/auditing options, staff training) to reduce that barrier. These cultural factors foster environments in which older adults may experience a diminished sense of belonging, thereby constituting a significant, though often less tangible, barrier to full participation and integration.

Discussion

The review of studies shows that the motivation of older adults to learn is a dynamic and multidimensional process, which evolves between phases of impulse, process and purpose, and encompasses cognitive, social, instrumental and eudaimonic domains.
The patterns identified in our results resonate deeply with, and also nuance, established theoretical frameworks. The observed evolution from preventative cognitive goals ('keeping the mind active') to an enjoyment of the intellectual process itself ('the passion for learning') can be understood through theories of adult learning. While the initial impulse may be instrumental, the experience itself fosters a more autotelic, or intrinsically rewarding, form of engagement, which is a hallmark of successful andragogy (Knowles, 1984).

Furthermore, the overwhelming preponderance of social motivations can be powerfully explained through the concept of social capital (Nyqvist et al., 2013). Our findings suggest that educational programmes act as crucial 'third places' (Oldenburg, 1989)—informal public spaces that facilitate the creation of the weak and strong ties essential for individual well-being and community resilience, particularly after the dissolution of workplace networks. This social drive is also consistent with Carstensen's Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST, Carstensen, 2021), which posits that with shrinking time horizons, older adults prioritise emotionally meaningful goals and relationships. The classroom, therefore, is not just a place of learning, but a primary arena for fulfilling this fundamental developmental priority.

Finally, our findings nuance the framing of later-life learning as a human right. While they strongly support this idea, the significant presence of instrumental motivations suggests a critical caveat. For many older adults, exercising this 'right' is conditioned by the practical necessity of navigating an increasingly digitised society. This raises the question of whether participation is always a free choice or, in some cases, a form of unremunerated 'work' required to avoid social exclusion.

Implications for policy and educational programme design

The dynamic nature of motivation uncovered in this review has profound implications, challenging a 'one-size-fits-all' model of later-life education.

The evolution from initial impulse to processual experience suggests that recruitment and retention policies must be distinct. Public-facing campaigns and outreach can effectively target pragmatic benefits ('learn to use your mobile phone to connect with

your grandchildren'). However, retention strategies must focus on what keeps learners engaged: the quality of the intellectual experience and, most critically, the creation of a vibrant and supportive learning community. In line with Oldenburg's (1989) concept of 'third places', these programmes should be intentionally designed not just as instructional spaces, but as hubs for connection that foster social capital, a key factor for continued participation.

Our findings call for flexible and modular educational offerings. Rather than rigid, semester-long courses, institutions should consider creating learning ecosystems where a participant can combine a practical workshop on cybersecurity with a seminar on philosophy, thereby acknowledging the coexistence of instrumental and existential needs. The design must be person-centred, allowing learners to craft their own educational journey as their motivations evolve. This approach not only responds to their changing needs but also directly reinforces the personal agency that is central to their motivation to learn.

Implications for future research

The limitations of this review, particularly the predominance of cross-sectional studies, highlight a clear path for future inquiry. There is an urgent need for longitudinal studies to explore how key life events (e.g., the onset of a health issue, becoming a grandparent) act as 'motivational turning points' that reconfigure learning priorities. Additionally, future research should explore these dynamics in underrepresented geographical and cultural contexts to develop a more globally relevant understanding of learning in later life. Specifically, comparative studies could analyse how the dialectic between pragmatic and existential needs manifests in collectivist versus individualistic cultures, which would allow for the development of more globally relevant educational models. Furthermore, it is crucial to investigate the tension identified in our theoretical discussion: do older adults perceive the learning of digital skills primarily as an act of empowerment and free choice, or as an imposed obligation to avoid social exclusion?

Strengths and limitations

This review's strength lies in its comprehensive, multi-pronged search strategy and its application of a novel, multidimensional framework to synthesise the findings, moving beyond mere description to a more nuanced, dynamic interpretation. However, the study is limited by the quality and design of the available primary research. The reliance on cross-sectional data means that our depiction of motivational evolution is an inference based on aggregated patterns rather than a direct observation of individual change over time. Furthermore, the synthesis is constrained by the geographical focus of the existing literature.

Conclusions

Education in later life is key to active ageing. This review redefines the motivation of older adults as a dynamic process of adaptation, connection, and self-realisation. The findings show that learning responds to a dual motivation: acquiring practical tools while also finding existential meaning.

In conclusion, we conceptualise the motivation to learn at this stage as a negotiation of identity and a search for purpose. This demands a paradigm shift: education for older adults is not merely a palliative activity, but a pillar for development in long-lived

societies. The challenge for educators and policymakers is to move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and co-create learning ecosystems that foster both personal growth and a sense of belonging, honouring the dialectic between pragmatic adaptation and existential expansion that defines learning in later life.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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Appendices

Table 2. Quality assessment of individual studies

Reference	Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria				
		1	2	3	4	5
Ackermann & Seifert (2021)	Quantitative non-randomized	NO	YES	NA	YES	YES
Aparicio (2014)	Qualitative	YES	YES	NA	NO	NO
Bjursell (2019)	Mixed methods	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Boulton-Lewis & Buys (2015)	Qualitative	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Boulton-Lewis et al. (2006)	Quantitative non-randomized	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES
Cachioni et al. (2014)	Quantitative non-randomized	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES
Cuenca (2011)	Mixed methods	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Escolar Chua & de Guzman (2014)	Qualitative	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Findsen et al. (2011)	Qualitative	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Hachem (2023)	Qualitative	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Kim & Merriam (2004)	Quantitative non-randomized	NA	YES	YES	NO	YES
Klimczak-Pawlak & Kossakowska-Pisarek (2018)	Mixed methods	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Kuklewicz & King, (2018)	Qualitative	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Leung et al. (2006)	Quantitative non-randomized	NO	NA	NO	NO	YES
Mulenga & Liang (2008)	Quantitative non-randomized	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES
Narushima et al. (2013)	Quantitative non-randomized	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES
Narushima et al. (2018)	Qualitative	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Nor (2011)	Mixed methods	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Nováková & Lorenzová (2020)	Quantitative non-randomized	NO	NA	YES	NO	YES
Roscoe et al. (2017)	Qualitative	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Schoultz et al. (2022)	Qualitative	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Reference	Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria				
		1	2	3	4	5
Silverstein et al. (2002)	Quantitative non-randomized	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES
Sloane-Seale & Kops (2004)	Quantitative descriptive	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES
Solé et al. (2005)	Mixed methods	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Takagi & Marroquin-Serrano (2024)	Qualitative	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Tam (2012)	Quantitative non-randomized	NO	NA	NO	NO	YES
Tam & Chui (2015)	Quantitative non-randomized	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES
Tyler et al. (2020)	Mixed methods	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Villar & Celdrán (2014)	Quantitative non-randomized	YES	YES	NA	YES	YES
Villar et al. (2010)	Quantitative non-randomized	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES
Xiong & Zuo (2019)	Mixed methods	YES	YES	YES	NA	NO

Notes. Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT, Hong et al., 2018) was used for bias assessment. Not Applicable/No Available: NA. 1. Qualitative: 1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question? 1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question? 1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data? 1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data? 1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation? 2. Quantitative non-randomized: 2.1. Are the participants representative of the target population? 2.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)? 2.3. Are there complete outcome data? 2.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis? 2.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended? 3. Quantitative descriptive: 3.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question? 3.2. Is the sample representative of the target population? 3.3. Are the measurements appropriate? 3.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low? 3.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question? 4. Mixed methods: 4.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question? 4.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question? 4.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted? 4.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed? 4.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?

Table 3. Description of selected articles

Authors/year/country	Sample/age	Target	Methodology	Results	Conclusions
Ackermann, T. P. & Seifert, A. (2021) *Switzerland*	811 participants. 50.2% women 56-96 years old	To investigate the role of specific individual motivations among older students in explaining the frequency of their participation in a university for seniors. Secondarily, it sought to analyze how health or socioeconomic factors could affect their chances of participation.	Quantitative and cross-sectional	All forms of motivation were linked to higher class attendance, but only instrumental motivation, the desire to use acquired knowledge, stood out as a key predictor of more frequent participation. Factors like health, mobility, socioeconomic status, and attitudes toward aging showed no significant impact, while greater distance from the university was associated with lower attendance.	Individual motivation, especially the desire to apply acquired knowledge, is the main factor driving class attendance among older adults. To boost participation, programs should offer content with clear practical value. In contrast, socioeconomic and health barriers mainly affect the decision to enrol rather than ongoing attendance.
Aparicio, J. E. (2014) *Spain*	24 participants. 65% women 65-75 years old, some over 85 years old.	1) To analyse university education for the elderly in Spain within the framework of lifelong learning. 2) To describe the university programme for seniors. 3) To examine the motivations and expectations of older students, as well as the benefits they obtain.	Qualitative	The motivations for participating in university programmes for older people are mainly expressive and cognitive, seeking personal growth, acquisition of knowledge and socialisation and contact with new people. The need to remain mentally active.	University programmes for the elderly are a response to the needs of an ageing society, promoting inclusion, social cohesion and lifelong learning. The University must adapt to this reality, making its educational offer more flexible and strengthening its social function.
Bjursell, C. (2019) *Sweden*	Study 1: 232 participants No number of women provided. Study 2: 53 participants. 72% female Older than 66 years, where the majority were in their 70s and 80s.	To explore the reasons why older adults participate in educational activities. The aim is to determine whether their involvement in education is due to personal, social or welfare reasons, and how extrinsic and intrinsic motivation combine in this process.	Mixed study (qualitative and quantitative), surveys and analysis of personal narratives.	The main motivations for engaging in education in later life include staying active, socialising, learning about topics of interest, sharing knowledge with others and seeking structure in life after retirement. Education is perceived as a pleasurable activity and valued for its well-being benefits.	Participation in education in later life is motivated by the desire to learn and the need for socialisation and well-being. The decision to participate is not always individual, but is influenced by the social environment, where education can play a crucial role in social inclusion and active ageing.

Authors/year/country	Sample/age	Target	Methodology	Results	Conclusions
Boulton-Lewis, G. M., & Buys, L. (2015) *Australia*	40 participants. 50% women Over 55 years old.	To explore the learning experiences and perspectives of older Australians.	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews	Participants' learning motivations were divided into two categories: pleasure and leisure (stimulation, interest, curiosity and self-knowledge) and purpose and relevance (skills development, enhancement of family relationships and intergenerationality).	Learning, whether for pleasure or for a specific purpose, keeps people active by learning and thus supports health and well-being.
Boulton-Lewis, G. M., Buys, L., & Lovie-Kitchin, J. (2006) *Australia*	2,645 persons. Does not provide number of women Age range 50 years to over 75 years. 68% were between 50 and 65 years old	To analyse the relationship between learning and active ageing. To understand the influence of learning on the quality of life of older adults.	Quantitative, cross-sectional design	Participants' motivations include staying mentally active, achieving personal goals, expanding skills and knowledge, and learning about technology, politics, culture and recreation.	Health and attitudes towards learning are crucial factors for active ageing. Education can significantly improve quality of life and independence. It is essential to create accessible continuing education programmes for older people.
Cachioni, M., Nascimento Ordonez, T., Lima da Silva, T. B., Tavares Batistoni, S. S., Sanches Yassuda, M., Caldeira Melo, R., Rodrigues da Costa Domingues, M., & Lopes, A. (2014). *Brazil*	306 participants 71.9% women 53-86 years old	The study aimed to: (1) describe the reasons reported by participants for enrolling in an Open University for the Third Age (UnATI) program, (2) identify correlations between these reasons and sociodemographic data, and (3) determine a set of predictors for each motivation type.	Quantitative and cross-sectional	Five main motivations were identified: improving general knowledge, personal development, social interaction, helping others, and using free time productively. Older age and higher education predicted the first; being single and not retired predicted personal development; lower education and being married predicted social interaction; and being single or widowed with certain income levels predicted productive use of free time.	Older adults join educational programs to learn, stay active, and remain socially connected. Motivations vary with sociodemographic factors, such as education and retirement status, guiding their engagement in lifelong learning.

Authors/year/country	Sample/age	Target	Methodology	Results	Conclusions
Cuenca, M. E. (2011) *Spain*	165 people. 60% women Over 65 years of age, with the over 70s being the most representative group.	To reflect on the role of learning and motivation in the education of older people, exploring how learning in later life offers opportunities for personal growth, the development of sociability and the promotion of autonomy. Also, to explore the motives for learning of students in a University Programme for Older Adults.	Mixed study (qualitative and quantitative), evaluative study. evaluative study.	The main reasons for students to participate in the university programme included the desire to learn, to be active, to broaden their knowledge, and to establish social contact and interpersonal relationships. In terms of their assessment of the programme, 81.3% of the students found the subjects interesting, 61.4% stated that their expectations were met, 82.6% stated that they broadened their knowledge and 53% felt that the subjects helped them in their daily lives.	Motivation in older people is mainly intrinsic. Learning in adulthood contributes significantly to autonomy, sociability and personal development. To optimise the learning experience, educational programmes should focus on meaningful content and active methodologies. The high satisfaction with the programme suggests that the education of older people is an essential element of active ageing.
Escolar Chua, R. L., & de Guzman, A. B. (2014) *The Philippines*	12 participants. 67% women 60 years and older.	Describe needs, benefits and expectations of older Filipinos in continuing education programmes.	Qualitative, phenomenological research	Three types of needs were identified: coping (age-related physical and social changes), contributory (desire to contribute to family and society) and nurturing (desire to continue to learn).	The study analyses the needs, benefits and expectations of Filipino older adults in continuing education, offering guidance for designing more relevant and functional geriatric programmes.
Findsen, B., Mccullough, S., & Mcewan, B. (2011) *Scotland*	85 participants. 48% women Over 60 years old.	Examining the interaction of gender and social class in the lifelong learning of working-class older adults	Predominantly qualitative, longitudinal design.	The main motivation for participating in formative studies was the development of identity capital. Participants showed a genuine interest in the subjects they were studying. They valued the intellectual stimulation and pleasure they derived from learning, as well as keeping up with technological changes. Many sought personal development; and those who had experienced divorce or bereavement found learning a way to combat social isolation.	This work reflects how learning can be a powerful tool for personal development and adaptation to life changes.
Hachem, H. (2023) *Lebanon*	11 participants. 81.8% women 56-74 years old	The study aimed to identify why older adults enrol in a University of the Third Age in Lebanon and to interpret these motivations sociologically, using Giddens' ontological security and Bourdieu's habitus to link individual choices with social structures.	Qualitative, cross-sectional design	Motivations were grouped into four main themes: contextual (life events prompting social and productive engagement), intrinsic (curiosity and love of learning), educational (interest in curricula and academic belonging), and facilitating (practical factors like prior awareness and convenient location).	Older adults' motivation to learn arises from the interaction of personal agency and socialization. Life events can threaten their sense of stability, and enrolling in a U3A helps restore identity and normalcy, especially for those with higher social, cultural, and economic capital who use learning to reinforce class identity and social connections.

Authors/year/country	Sample/age	Target	Methodology	Results	Conclusions
Kim, A., & Merriam, S. B. (2004) *The USA*	189 participants. 70% women 61-70 years old.	To examine the motivations of older adults participating in a Learning in Retirement Institute (LIRI).	Quantitative, cross-sectional design	Cognitive interest was the most important factor influencing participation, followed by social contact. Educational level negatively predicted social stimulation, and length of residence in the city was negatively associated with social contact. Married participants were less motivated by social contact than unmarried participants.	Older adults are more motivated by cognitive interest than by other factors to engage in learning, as they seek to satisfy their intellectual curiosity.
Klimczak-Pawlak, A., & Kossakowska-Pisarek, S. (2018) *Poland*	54 participants. Does not provide number of women 50-59 years old.	Exploring the needs, attitudes and emotions of students aged 50+ on English language courses	Exploratory and retrospective	The main reason for studying English was to improve communication, gain confidence and feel part of Europe. The most valued skills were verbal communication and listening comprehension. Students mentioned difficulties in listening and dealing with negative emotions as the main obstacles in their learning.	To enhance the learning experience of older students, teachers need to understand their needs, beliefs, and attitudes. It is crucial that they foster relaxed and unpressured learning environments.
Kuklewicz, A., & King, J. (2018) *Poland*	7 participants. 86% female 55-68 years old.	Exploring older people's English language learning experiences at the Open University in Poland	Qualitative, narrative enquiry	Older adults demonstrated strong intrinsic motivation to learn English. Family connection was an important factor. They wanted to improve their ability to use computers and the Internet in English. They also saw learning to keep their memory active and prevent cognitive decline. Finally, personal challenge and self-improvement gave them satisfaction and pride in acquiring new knowledge.	Older adults learning a second language are intrinsically motivated, take pride in their achievements and represent a valuable group to engage with.

Authors/year/country	Sample/age	Target	Methodology	Results	Conclusions
Leung, A., Lui, Y.-H., & Chi, I. (2006) *Hong Kong*	190 participants. The majority were women, the number is not specified Over 50 years old	Examining the lifelong learning experience of older people in Hong Kong.	Cross-sectional study with surveys	Older people generally learn through intrinsic motivation rather than instrumental motivation.	The results are key to understanding lifelong learning (LLL) in the Chinese population and to developing appropriate LLL policies in Hong Kong.
Mulenga, D., & Liang, J.-S. (2008) *Taiwan*	371 participants. 56% female group 55-64 years old. 36% women group over 65 and over	To identify motivational constructs and their relationship with socio-demographic characteristics in distance education of older adults.	Quantitative, cross-sectional design	The factor analysis identified four main aspects of motivation: 1) Intellectual stimulation. 2) Keeping up to date and personal satisfaction 3) Adjustment. 4) Escape and social contact.	Motivational factors for older adults in distance learning are multifaceted, but learning through intellectual stimulation stands out
Narushima, M., Liu, J., & Diestelkamp, N. (2013) *Canada*	699 participants. 74% female 60 years and older.	To examine the motivations and perceived benefits of older adults in continuing education programmes.	Quantitative, cross-sectional design	Gender, income and self-assessed health status influenced motivations and perceived benefits. Women emphasised social and practical motivations, while low-income and poorer health groups valued practical and psychological benefits more highly.	Older adults' motivations to participate in educational activities are influenced by their gender, income and health status.
Narushima, M., Liu, J., & Diestelkamp, N. (2018) *Canada*	10 participants. 80% female 70-90 years old.	To explore the lifelong learning experiences of vulnerable older adults to understand (a) what this activity entails in their lives, (b) the meanings they attribute to it, and (c) how participation in learning programs helps them maintain well-being and independence despite daily challenges.	Qualitative, based on a hermeneutic phenomenological approach	The meanings of learning for older adults were expressed across five existential dimensions: it helps manage the gap between an active mind and an aging body, reduces social isolation by fostering peer support, expands mental space despite physical limitations, structures time by giving purpose and linking past, present, and future, and enhances self-esteem, confidence, and resilience, with the act of learning itself affirming personal identity.	For vulnerable older adults, learning is essential for existence, serving as both self-help to cope with life changes and a proactive means to grow. Lifelong learning also promotes health and helps reduce social inequalities.

Authors/year/country	Sample/age	Target	Methodology	Results	Conclusions
Nor, N. M. M. (2011) *Malaysia*	77 participants. 31% female 5 respondents and 72 people who completed a survey. 50 years and older.	To identify factors related to the participation of older adult learners in distance education degree programmes, as well as the characteristics of the student body.	Mixed study (qualitative and quantitative), interviews, and questionnaires.	The profile of older adult learners participating in training programmes includes high motivation, eagerness to learn, health awareness, effective time management, good social skills, absence of financial difficulties and strong family support.	Distance learning institutions face a more complex and dynamic group of learners. Older adult learners can undertake rigorous undergraduate degree programmes.
Nováková, D., & Lorenzová, J. (2020) *The Czech Republic*	150 participants. 67% female 66-75 years old.	To identify the motivational factors driving seniors to enrol in University of the Third Age (U3A) courses at Charles University (Prague). Secondary aims included examining whether these motivations varied by gender, age, educational level, or field of study.	Quantitative and cross-sectional	The main motivation for U3A students was the desire to learn, followed by spending free time actively, with forming new relationships being least important. Motivations did not vary by gender, age, or education, but field of study influenced preferences, with medical and humanities students favouring learning and natural sciences students leaning slightly toward social connections.	Seniors' main motivation for participating in the U3A is intrinsic: the desire to learn and enrich knowledge, linked to self-realization and life quality. Social factors are secondary, and motivations remain consistent regardless of age, gender, or education. Participation primarily fulfils cognitive and personal development needs, enhancing overall well-being.
Roscoe, K. D., Morgan, F., & Lavender, P. (2017) *The United Kingdom*	10 women. 65-82 years old	Exploring the narratives of older women learning ICT skills in a community centre.	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews	Four key themes: the need to keep up with the times and avoid technological backwardness; its application for daily management and independence; its role as a catalyst for social inclusion and personal development; transformative impact on social participation and integration.	Learning ICT skills is a human right for older adults and provides opportunities for social participation and interaction.
Schoultz, M., Öhman, J., & Quennerstedt, M. (2022) *Sweden*	23 participants. 80% female 55 years and older.	To explore the meaning of intrinsic values in non-formal education for older adults, focusing on which values are central and how they are experienced in practice.	Qualitative and cross-sectional	Older adults in non-formal education experienced diverse intrinsic values, including intellectual growth through new ideas and reflection, emotional benefits like enrichment, meaning, and joy, existential awareness of life and aging, and social value through support and a sense of community.	Education for older adults holds intrinsic values beyond instrumental goals, experienced through engagement with content, peers, and instructors. Intellectual, emotional, existential, and social values intertwine, creating a holistic learning experience, with value found in the active participation itself rather than just outcomes.

Authors/year/country	Sample/age	Target	Methodology	Results	Conclusions
Silverstein, N. M., Choi, L. H., & Bulot, J. J. (2002) *The USA*	504 participants. Does not provide number of women 52-87 years old,	To explore people's motivations for pursuing higher education, obstacles and plans after completing their studies.	Action research, telephone interviews and mail surveys	Older people enrolled in courses because of an interest in the subject, a desire to be informed, gain confidence and enjoy learning. The main obstacles were family obligations and course scheduling. Older adults were motivated by personal satisfaction, and they preferred a mixed environment with young and older people.	The study identifies that the main factors influencing older people's enrolment in higher education include interest in the subject, the desire to be more knowledgeable, the pursuit of self-confidence and the enjoyment of learning. The creation of more inclusive and age-friendly university campuses, promoting learning environments that facilitate their participation and well-being within the academic community.
Sloane-Seale, A., & Kops, B. (2004) *Canada*	227 participants. More women than men, exact number not specified. 60-74 years old.	To identify interests and motivations of older adults in Creative Retirement Manitoba.	Quantitative, structured surveys	The topics of interest were technology, arts and leisure. The main motivation was the pleasure of learning, while the biggest barrier was lack of time. Hands-on learning was preferred.	Learning is key in the lives of older adults. Institutions can enhance their impact by collaborating with the community and offering practical learning in social settings.
Solé, C., Triadó, C., Villar, F., Riera, M.A., & Chamarro, A (2005). *Spain*	79 people. 75% women Between 60 and 75 years old.	To study the reasons for and benefits of education from the point of view of older people participating in training activities in training centres for older people.	Mixed study (qualitative and quantitative), semi-structured interviews, and a questionnaire.	The main reasons for participating in educational activities in old age include keeping mentally active, occupying time in a useful way, growing as a person and deepening knowledge, pursuing a hobby or vocation, having fun and being distracted. The perceived benefits of these activities are feeling better about oneself, interacting with peers, feeling more useful and more optimistic about life and enjoying new friendships. Gender differences were observed.	There are multiple reasons for older adults to participate in educational activities, including personal development, cognitive stimulation and useful use of time. The perceived benefits of these activities are closely related to emotional well-being, self-esteem and social relationships.
Takagi, E., & Marroquin-Serrano, M. S. (2024) *The USA*	17 participants. 82% women 60s: 7 70s: 5 80s: 4	To investigate older adults' perceptions of the Age-Friendly University (AFU) principles.	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews	Older adults have different motivations and interests in lifelong learning, ranging from leisure activities to more rigorous academic opportunities and learning for civic engagement. Participants expressed mixed feelings about learning with younger generations. Accessibility was identified as an important issue.	Universities must recognise and accommodate the diverse needs of older students; create robust and carefully designed intergenerational programming; and engage in the work necessary to combat ageism on and off campus.

Authors/year/country	Sample/age	Target	Methodology	Results	Conclusions
Tam, M. (2012) *Hong Kong*	50 participants (24 from group A and 26 from group B). No number of women Group A: over 60 years old. Group B: between 28 and 73 years old.	To explore perceptions of successful ageing among older adults in Hong Kong, and the importance of learning in this process.	Mixed methods, questionnaires	The most important perceptions associated with successful ageing included good physical and mental health, as well as staying active and engaged in life. Older people were found to be interested in a wide range of topics, including those related to health, technology, arts and culture. The main barriers were personal health problems, health of family members and memory difficulties.	Learning has a positive impact on ageing. It is essential to overcome health and institutional barriers to learning for older adults by providing appropriate courses and improving access to facilities.
Tam, M., & Chui, E. (2015) *Hong Kong*	519 participants. 63% female Between 55 and over 75 years old.	To investigate how a group of older people in Hong Kong understood the meaning of successful ageing and learning in later life.	Quantitative, structured surveys	Participants highlighted 'staying in good health', 'having a sense of peace' and 'adjusting to change' as essential for successful ageing, while in adult learning they valued 'broadening horizons', 'staying physically and mentally healthy' and 'acquiring new knowledge or skills'. The most common learning interests were health, leisure and art.	The study highlights the importance of understanding how older adults conceptualise ageing and learning. Learning in later life is associated with positive well-being outcomes. Interventions need to address the different barriers faced by 'learners' and 'non-learners' to promote wider participation in lifelong learning.
Tyler, M., De George-Walker, L., & Simic, V. (2020) *Australia*	10 participants. 60% female 64-81 years old.	To explore older adults' experiences and motivations with ICT in depth, going beyond skill assessment to understand why engagement varies despite abilities and the implications for their learning and training.	Qualitative, a case study method was used to explore individual experiences in depth.	Higher digital skills did not guarantee greater ICT use; motivation was key. Older adults showed diverse profiles, and personal usefulness strongly predicted engagement. Positive attitudes arose when usefulness was high and effort low, while anxiety and low self-efficacy led to ambivalence or low use.	For older adults, personal-value motivation is more important than technical skill. ICT training should be flexible, tailored to individual goals and preferences, foster self-efficacy through successful experiences, and leverage social connections to encourage adoption and continued use.

Authors/year/country	Sample/age	Target	Methodology	Results	Conclusions
Villar, F., & Celdrán, M. (2014) *Spain*	4559 participants. More women than men, exact number not specified. 60-74 years old.	To examine reasons and barriers for the participation of older Spanish adults in non-degree educational programmes.	Quantitative, EADA survey analysis	Expressive motivations, such as personal interest, fun and socialisation, were the most common (76.1%). Practical instrumental motivations, mentioned by 61.9% of participants. Work-related instrumental motivations were more frequent among people who were still working (20.6%). The most common barriers to participation were internal, such as age or health restrictions.	The work proposes a greater emphasis on the practical applicability of what is taught. Internal barriers are key factors limiting participation. Education policies need to consider these factors to promote participation in non-formal educational activities.
Villar, F., Pinazo, S., Triadó, C., Cldrán, M., & Solé, C. (2010) *Spain*	321 participants. 58.6% female 55-86 years old.	To explore why older adults enrol in university programs (UPOP) and the benefits they perceive, as well as to compare how student profiles, motivations, and perceived benefits differ between two distinct models of university programs for older adults in Spain.	Quantitative, cross-sectional, and comparative.	Older adults participated in university programs mainly for cognitive and expressive reasons, valuing psychological and social benefits like personal satisfaction, joy, and friendships. Motivations were similar across program models, though student profiles differed by age, gender, and weekly hours. Lower education predicted higher motivation, while older age and more program hours predicted greater perceived benefits.	Older adults join university programs mainly for intrinsic reasons, gaining psychological and social benefits. Program type has little effect, while those with lower education are the most motivated and benefit most.
Xiong, J., & Zuo, M. (2019) *China*	89 participants. 71.9% female 60 years and older.	To identify and classify older adults' learning motivations in MOOCs and to examine how these motivations differ by age group ('younger-old' vs. 'older-old') and gender.	Mixed methods	Six main motivations were identified among older adults in MOOCs: problem-solving (most popular), knowledge acquisition, cognitive improvement, enjoyment, helping others, and social interaction. Younger-old adults (60–74) were more motivated by problem-solving, while older-old adults (75+) prioritized knowledge acquisition. Men were more motivated by knowledge acquisition and social interaction, whereas women were more motivated by enjoyment.	Older adults' motivations in MOOCs are diverse and age- and gender-dependent, with cognitive improvement as a distinctive factor. Younger-old adults focus on practical problems, while older-old adults learn for pleasure, highlighting the need for tailored course design.