Barriers to adults' continuing education

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ABSTRACT

Adult participation in education is frequently considered an individual responsibility. However, as a study conducted in twelve European countries reported, the decision to continue or return to education depends on the interaction of a complex set of factors (Boeren et al. 2012). These are not limited to individual factors, but also to factors which are related with the educational offer, the labour market, education, economic and social policies. In fact, participation in education has been associated, in some studies to the characteristics of the welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1989; Leibfried, 1992). Within Europe, Portugal is among the countries whose participation of adults in education is lowest alongside Greece and some Eastern European countries (Boateng, 2009).

Many international studies have sought to understand adults' motivations to participate in education and to continue studying, both in a European comparative perspective (Boeren et al. 2012), as well as in particular countries. The most basic distinction includes intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. In the case of the former, individuals value education for the pleasure, the learning, or the feeling of achievement that education brings (Lepper, 1988). In the case of the latter, individuals aim to obtain some external reward from education, such as social recognition, career prospects, higher salary, etc.

This paper investigates Portuguese adults' perceptions of the ideal educational level they would like to hold, the willingness to pursue education towards this level and the reasons why they choose not to continue studying. The analysis of these perceptions will shed light on the barriers to continuing or returning to education and how these vary according to sex, age and educational level.

The data were collected through a telephone survey conducted in March 2016 with a representative sample of the Portuguese adult population (18 years and over) regarding sex, age and attained educational level (n=1201). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests to identify significant differences between groups of respondents.

Findings suggest that most respondents would like to hold an educational level higher than the one they currently have. However, this appears to be mostly wishful thinking because the majority of them do not intend to continue studying or return to education. One of the most commonly mentioned obstacles is age. Moreover, more than half of the respondents considered that they do not need more education either for their daily activities or for their professional life. These overall results hide differences by sex, age, and educational level that the paper will explore.

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