



The Role of the University Open to Elderly People (UnAPI/UFMS) in Welcome, Inclusion, Training and Social and Health education

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Abstract. Population aging is a direct consequence of the demographic transition underway in Brazil and generated significant impacts on Brazilian society. During the aging process, individuals often experience vulnerability and social isolation, frequently associated with loneliness, which can compromise their autonomy and independence. In 2018, the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS) created an institutional university extension program, known as UnAPI - Universidade Aberta à Pessoa Idosa (Open University for the Elderly), designed to welcome and include elderly people within the university environment. The program contributes to the preservation of autonomy and independence, while fostering the development of new social bonds and experiences exchange through many intergenerational activities. This paper discusses the program's development within 2022-2025, considering its expansion across different UFMS campuses, the number of vacancies offered, and student enrollment. Since its creation, the program has demonstrated consistent growth. The activities offered include Basic Computing; the Active Life Project, Community Gardening, Oral Health, Choir, Ballroom Dancing, Digital Literacy, Languages and Memory Workshops. UnAPI/UFMS stands out as an innovative and effective strategy for inclusion, training, and social and health education of elderly people in the university context, while also aligning with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as SDGs 3, 4, 10, and 11. Moreover, it strengthens opportunities for building friendships and promoting the sharing of knowledge and life experiences.

Keywords:

Elderly, Social Inclusion, University, Community-Institutional Relations.

1. Introduction

The demographic transition experienced by Brazil in recent decades because of advances in socioeconomic conditions and changes in the disease profile has consolidated population aging as a new dynamic in Brazilian society [1]. Currently, the elderly are the fastest growing population segment, and it is estimated that, by 2025, Brazil will have the sixth largest elderly population in the world [2]. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines individuals aged 65 and over as elderly in developed countries and those aged 60 and over in developing countries.

Population aging is complex, like any human phenomenon, growing and, by all indications, inevitable. The impact on the organization and behavior of society and public policies already constitutes the current scenario of need for attention and tends to become more acute in the not-so-distant future outlook. The interpretation of this phenomenon and the resulting actions require the expansion of the boundaries required in the organization, categorization and specialization of technical and scientific knowledge, as well as the consideration of the interdependent mechanisms that delimit and shape the contours of the social fabric.

Aging is a natural process that characterizes a phase of human life and involves physical, psychological and social changes that affect everyone differently, with prolonged survival [3]. Aging brings with it several problems that affect a person's quality of life. It is a process that often occurs in conjunction with physical limitations, cognitive losses, the onset of depression and social isolation. Given this scenario, it becomes essential to offer comprehensive and continuous care to the elderly, considering the greater incidence of factors that compromise their well-being, such as the emergence of chronic diseases, feelings of isolation and loneliness, in addition to the possible loss of autonomy and independence.

By fostering interaction between academia and the broader community, where classroom theories are applied in practice, university extension provides significant contributions not only to students but also to society, which benefits directly from shared learning [4]. Rooted in its educational, cultural, and scientific mission, university extension is intrinsically connected to teaching and research, seeking to promote the exchange between academic knowledge and the knowledge constructed in diverse social contexts. At the same time, it enables the democratization of knowledge produced within the university and creates opportunities for the community to actively engage in academic life.

Extension constitutes a strategic arena for fostering integrated practices across diverse fields of knowledge [5]. As highlighted by the same author, for such integration to materialize it is essential to establish mechanisms that promote the encounter and dialogue among different actors, thereby strengthening multidisciplinary. In this process, the interaction of multiple individuals enhances the development of civic and human awareness, contributing to the formation of transformative subjects capable of positioning themselves in the world with a more critical and active posture. In this sense, university extension consolidates itself as a powerful instrument for social transformation.

The concept of the University of the Third Age emerged in France at the end of the 1960s. Initially, it lacked a structured educational orientation and operated primarily as a space for cultural and social activities, designed to occupy leisure time and promote social interaction [6]. In Brazil, the first initiative directed toward offering cultural and educational activities for older adults was developed by Sesc in São Paulo in 1963. It was also through this institution that, in 1977, the first Open School for the Elderly was established [7].

Within the university environment, the pioneering national experience of an extension

project aimed at education and culture for the elderly was led by the Center for Studies on the Elderly (NETI) at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), created through Ordinance No. 0484/GR/83. From the 1990s onwards, there was a significant expansion of extension initiatives and university programs directed at older adults, implemented by several higher education institutions across the country [8].

At the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS), initiatives grounded in the educational pillars of teaching, research, and extension have been developed with the purpose of articulating learning processes with social practice. This integration not only enriches student education but also amplifies the university's contribution to society. In this framework, by aligning these three dimensions, higher education institutions assume a strategic role in addressing the needs of the elderly population, acting as complementary agents to the traditional health system and contributing to the mitigation of its limitations.

The Open University for the Elderly (UnAPI) constitutes an institutional extension program aimed at organizing, promoting, and strengthening integrated actions in teaching, research, and extension. Its central focus lies in valuing older adults within society and in qualifying public services and policies directed at this segment, leveraging the university's multi-campus structure, intersectorality, and interdisciplinarity.

Grounded in the principles of extension as an educational, cultural, and scientific process intrinsically linked to teaching and research, UnAPI seeks to foster exchanges between academic knowledge and other forms of knowledge produced in diverse social contexts, while democratizing the knowledge generated at the university and creating opportunities for active community participation in academic life [9].

Within the context of university extension programs, UnAPI/UFMS can be characterized as an innovative and effective strategy for fostering inclusion, support, and responses to the everyday challenges faced by older adults. Considering its increasing significance and the growing demand for its activities, this study aims to analyze the program's evolution between 2022 and 2025, considering its expansion across UFMS different campuses, the number of vacancies offered, and patterns of student enrollment.

2. Methodology

The UnAPI institutional extension program, formally approved by the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS) in 2018, structures its initiatives around four strategic and interdependent axes that function in a complementary and multidisciplinary manner. Axis 1 encompasses actions of social and digital inclusion, expressed through outreach, cultural, and sports activities directed toward the elderly. Axis 2 focuses on assistance, offering health care and biopsychosocial support services. Axis 3 involves training and professional development through courses and capacity-building events aimed at UnAPI participants, university students, and professionals engaged or interested in gerontology. Finally, Axis 4 is dedicated to scientific dissemination and popularization, seeking to democratize and expand access to scientific knowledge on aging.

Through these four axes, UnAPI/UFMS aims to promote the reception, inclusion, and permanence of elderly individuals within the university environment, thereby contributing to the preservation of autonomy and independence. At the same time, it creates opportunities for the establishment of new social bonds and the exchange of knowledge and experiences through a wide range of free intergenerational activities. At present, UnAPI maintains six centers located in the municipalities of Campo Grande, Coxim, Três Lagoas, Aquidauana, Naviraí, and Corumbá, in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul.

The program's methodology is based on the planning and execution of initiatives in reception, inclusion, training, and social and health education, directed not only at older adults in the community but also at academics and professionals interested in gerontology. Activities are conducted through regular in-person meetings as well as via distance-learning platforms, in synchronous and asynchronous formats. To achieve its objectives, UnAPI relies on a collaborative structure that includes a general coordinator, an administrative secretary, local coordinators, coordinators for specific activities, scholarship holders and volunteers.

The coordination of activities may be assumed by UFMS faculty members, administrative staff, UnAPI participants, or external collaborators, provided they demonstrate appropriate qualifications and experience in the proposed area. Admission to the program requires candidates to be at least 60 years old, with additional prerequisites depending on the specific activity. The selection process, carried out biannually, is formalized through a public notice published in the official UFMS bulletin and on the website of the Pro-rectorate of Extension, Culture, and Sports (Proece). Each participant may enroll in up to four activities per semester, in addition to two undergraduate courses with available seats for UnAPI students. All activities follow the institutional academic calendar, and certification requires a minimum attendance of 75% and completion of the assessment tasks.

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative procedures, with a descriptive and exploratory design. The deductive method guided the investigation, moving from the theoretical framework to university extension and population aging toward the empirical analysis of UnAPI's trajectory. Data collection involved documentary and institutional research, including UFMS reports, official notices, and program records between 2022 and 2025. Quantitative data were systematized to identify trends in the expansion of units, vacancies, and enrollments, while qualitative analysis provided interpretive insights into the program's social and educational impacts.

3. Results, Discussions and Implementation

In the first semester of 2025, the UnAPI program offered 69 extension, cultural, and sports activities, totaling 2,419 vacancies, in addition to 234 vacancies in 16 undergraduate courses, reaching 2,653 opportunities distributed across the centers in Campo Grande, Aquidauana, Coxim, Três Lagoas, Corumbá, and Naviraí, Mato Grosso do Sul.

Between 2023 and 2025, there was a significant increase in both the number of extension activities and the vacancies offered in isolated courses (Figure 1). Initially restricted to the University City in Campo Grande, UnAPI expanded to five additional campuses, reflecting a clear strategy of geographic and institutional growth (Figure 2). This expansion directly contributed to a fourfold increase in the number of vacancies available for older adults, ensuring broader access and diversity in the activities provided (Figure 3).

In the first semester of 2022, the activities were offered only at the University City, namely: Dialogues between Science and Society, Dance and Body Awareness, Choir, Financial Education, Active Life, Introduction to Microcomputing, Does Your Heart Take Sunshine?, Active and Healthy Aging, Physical Conditioning, Oral Health, Food and Nutritional Education, Aging: Learning and Quality of Life, Memory Workshops and Medication for the Elderly. In the second half of 2022, were offered: Garden Community, Dance and Body Awareness, Physiotherapy, Choir, Basic IT, Active Life, Topics on Parasites and Health, Theater, Active and Healthy Aging, Oral Health, Medications for the Elderly, Memory Workshops, Astronomy Study Group, Diversity Sharing Knowledge, Art, Culture and Mental Health, Aging in Focus, Mental Health Promotion Group and Guitar.

In addition to the extension activities, vacancies in the following isolated in-person undergraduate courses were made available to UnAPI students: Medical Biochemistry, Dance Teaching Methodology, History of Education, Historical Formation of the Portuguese Language, Psychology, Curriculum and Didactics in Physical Education, Latin Language, Special Topics in Sociology, Hospital and Health Psychology, Cost Analysis and Service Management. Throughout the semesters, activities are offered according to the demand proposed by UnAPI students, as well as the initiatives of the teachers and technicians involved. The results show adherence and participation of more and more people involved, adding activities of great interest and relevance to the elderly (Figure 4).

Currently, in the first half of 2025, the activities offered by the UnAPI center in Campo Grande were: Language Teaching (English, Spanish and Introduction to Hispanic Language and Culture), Games for Socialization and Cognitive Stimulation, Active and Healthy Aging, Oral Health and Quality of Life, Fonovida, Teaching Physiology and Anatomy, Sharing Knowledge between Generations, Reading Circles, Memory Workshops, Theater, Craft Activities, Literacy and Literacy, Exploring the Cell Phone in Everyday Life, Elderly in Action, Physical Conditioning, Tai Chi Chuan, Auriculotherapy, Motor and Cognitive Physiotherapy, Commensality and Culinary Skills, Ballroom Dancing, Agroecological Garden [10], Food and Nutrition Education, Basic Computer Science, Water Aerobics, Siriri Folk Dance, Belly dancing, Culture, Leisure and Tourism, Capotherapy, Guitar, UFMS Urban Trails and Educational Practices in Health and Environmental Preservation.

In addition to the extension actions, vacancies in the following isolated in-person undergraduate courses were made available to UnAPI students: Construction Technologies, Fundamentals of Administration, Limnology, Nutrition and Physical Activity, Spanish Language, Environmental Education, Bioethics, Educational Policies, Environmental Planning and Management, Marketing, Dance Teaching Methodologies, Creative Writing Workshop, Epistemology of Human Sciences, Instrumental English Language, English Language I and Statistics Applied to Physical Education.

The activities offered by the UnAPI center in Aquidauana included: Basic Libria, Literacy and Literacy Workshop, Drawing Workshop on Paper with Colored Pencils and Wax Crayons, Toxic and Medicinal Plants Workshop, Macramé Workshop, IT, Culture and Learning with the Terena Ethnic Group and Playing with Mathematics. The activities offered at the UnAPI center in Coxim included: Viva Pharmacy, Recipes and Cuisine from Coxim, Building Links Between the Community and Institutionalized Elderly People, Integrative Practices and Well-being, Theater, Movimentação (Movement-Action) the Body in Motion and Health in Progress.

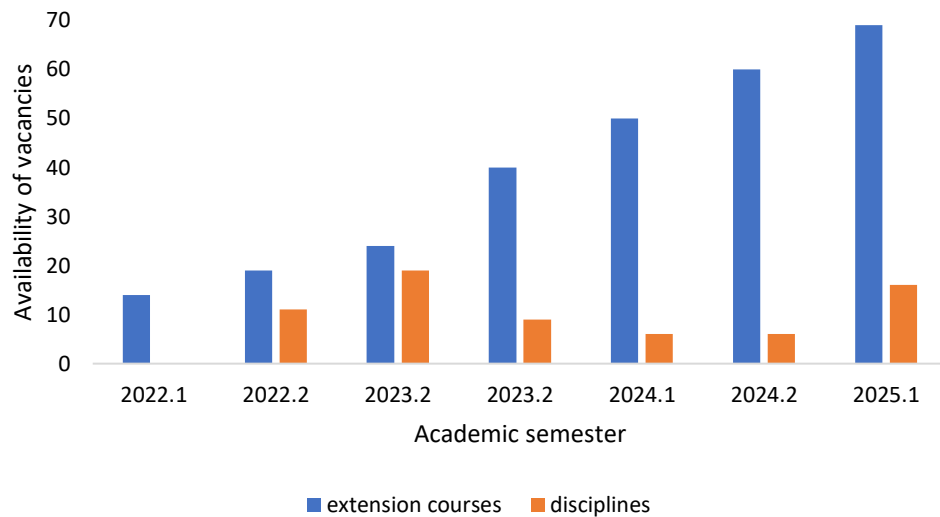


Figure 1. Offer of extension courses, vacancies in disciplines and participation of UFMS campuses in UnAPI

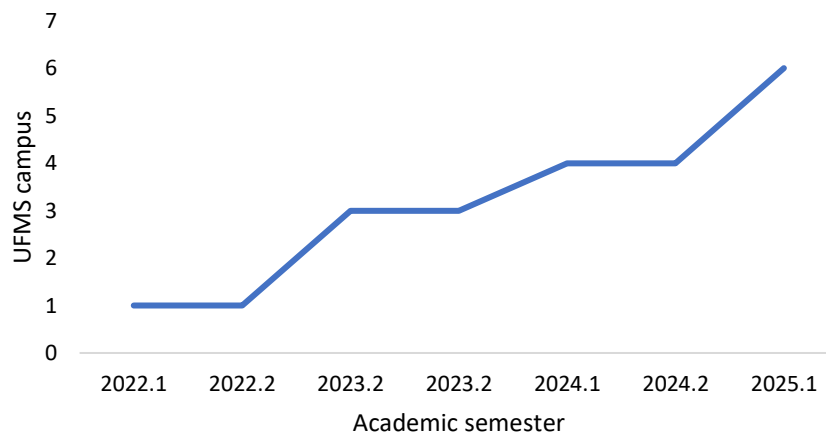


Figure 2. Expansion of UNAPI units on UFMS campuses

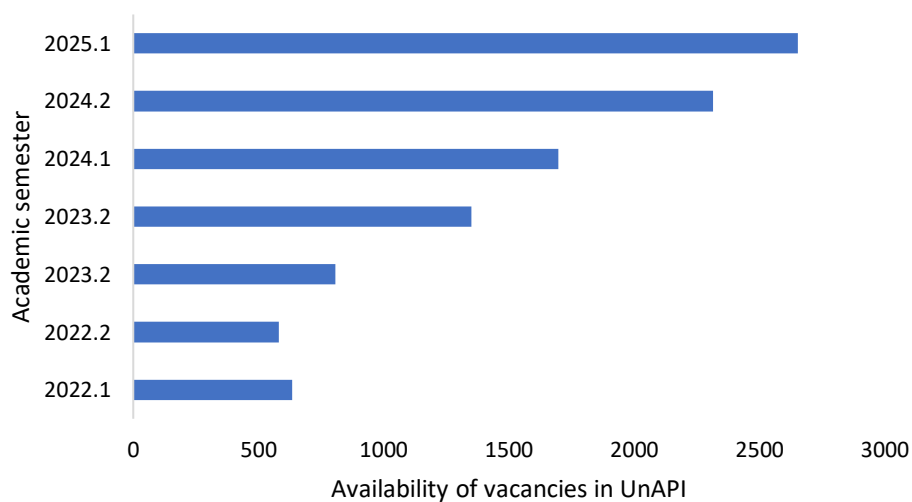


Figure 3. Availability of semester vacancies between 2022 and 2025 at UnAPI



Figure 4. Extension activities carried out at UnAPI

The activities offered at the UnAPI Três Lagoas center were: Improving the Use of Smartphones and Tablets, IT, Theories and Practices of Sustainability, Language Teaching (Italian, Spanish and English), Health and Aging in Focus, Weight Training Academy and Working the Body and Mind. At the UnAPI Naviraí center, the following activities were offered: My Story in Video, Music, Singing and Playfulness, Dance Workshop and Introduction to Social Networks. At the UnAPI Corumbá center, the following activities were offered: IT, Physical Activity for Promoting Health and Quality of Life, Dialogical Gatherings, Yoga and Stretching. Finally, in Paranaíba UnAPI center, in the first half of 2025, the activity Practices with smartphones for the elderly was offered.

This wide array of activities demonstrates clear alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDGs 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 4 (Quality Education), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) [11,12]. Physical activities, memory workshops, reading activities, vegetable garden, cooking workshops, and dance workshops are examples of activities in line with SDG 3.

Between 2022 and 2025, the program not only expanded in terms of physical units and number of vacancies, growing more than fourfold, but also strengthened its capacity for innovation, responsiveness to demand, and institutional recognition. The geographic expansion facilitated new partnerships, enabling local contextualized activities, while simultaneously improving visibility, enrollment rates, and long-term sustainability.

However, analyzing the increase in vacancies should consider not only absolute

numbers, but also the occupancy rate and demand index. In established extension programs, expanding service capacity tends to be accompanied by strategies to maintain pedagogical quality, individualized monitoring, and participant engagement. Thus, quantitative growth, when combined with efficient management and participatory methodologies, enhances the program's social and educational impact.

In this sense, the activities are related to health promotion through understanding, prevention and adherence, as well as encouraging the adoption of healthier habits. Knowledge of healthier lifestyles, such as beginning regular physical activity or improving dietary patterns, can prevent or ameliorate various comorbidities, such as hypertension, diabetes, obesity and depression. Furthermore, these activities often stimulate social interaction, which is a protective factor against cognitive decline and emotional distress. They also contribute to building a support network, reinforcing emotional bonds and reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation that are common among elderly individuals.

In many cases, participation in these initiatives becomes a turning point for elderly people who, due to social or physical limitations, have reduced their engagement in everyday life. UnAPI's approach, by integrating physical, cultural and educational dimensions, offers a holistic view of health that considers not only the absence of disease, but the complete physical, mental and social well-being of individuals. Thus, these actions are not only aligned with SDG 3, but they also embody its principles by actively contributing to the construction of healthier, more inclusive and more resilient communities.

Computer classes, language teaching, literacy, among many others, are activities that promote education and lifelong learning, in line with SDG 4. The activities offered provide opportunities for learning and social interaction in the university environment, fostering a sense of appreciation among seniors, who begin to recognize themselves as individuals with potential for development. Engaging in intellectual practices contributes to empowerment and increased self-esteem [13].

Activities that promote social participation and inclusion, such as the UnAPI activities involving the themes of communication technologies, digital inclusion and intergenerational exchange, as well as discussion groups, for example, are activities aligned with SDG 10. Inclusive education aimed at the elderly must enable social inclusion, the recognition of the new social roles that the elderly assumes as the years go by and must transform action and experience into something that broadens our worldview towards a civic attitude that respects differences [14,15].

Finally, in line with SDG 11, we can mention the agroecological garden, educational practices in health and environmental preservation, environmental education, environmental management, which are actions that involve participants in the construction of more sustainable places. These activities strengthen the bonds of coexistence and the sense of belonging that will allow for the expansion of citizenship and participatory governance; in these moments, there is the construction of recognition of the individual being from the other and the cities or places become more inclusive spaces [16].

The SDG 3 plays a key role in promoting healthier, more equitable and sustainable cities. Through ambitious targets and strategic actions, it seeks to transform urban contexts into environments that promote the physical and mental health of the population throughout the life cycle. In addition to the extension actions offered directly to the elderly, several events and courses were offered in the second half of 2024, for example, among which the Advanced Course for Caregivers of the Elderly stands out, with a workload of 40 hours, online teaching methodology and with participants from 11 states in Brazil.

Several empirical evidence and studies [17–24] indicate the positive impacts of education on the quality of life of elderly people, highlighting the benefits promoted by educational initiatives in several dimensions. Firstly, participation in educational activities is related to maintaining engagement in daily activities, increasing life satisfaction, improving perceived health and strengthening cognitive functions — indicators of successful aging. Secondly, such initiatives provide emotional, informational and instrumental support, which are essential for facing the challenges inherent to aging and significant life events. In addition, they promote daily well-being, reactivate motivations that have been latent since youth and promote the development of new cognitive skills.

These activities also stimulate feelings of well-being, strengthen interpersonal relationships and have a positive impact on reducing depression and increasing social satisfaction among participants. Furthermore, they contribute to personal growth, provide opportunities for community action, encourage creativity and productivity, create spaces for socialization and promote the construction of new knowledge, in addition to fostering more positive attitudes towards old age. Finally, although aging is naturally associated with cognitive losses, continuous access to knowledge can function as a significant source of enrichment and modulation of cognitive capacities at any stage of life.

The opportunity to share knowledge and skills among the elderly, teachers and undergraduate students stands out, which strengthens social relationships, the feeling of acceptance and belonging, and learning across generations. In addition to the family nucleus, social interaction plays a fundamental role in the life of the elderly person, as it enables the exchange of affection, experiences, ideas, feelings, knowledge and doubts, promoting a continuous interaction marked by emotional bonds. Other relevant aspects involve the stimulation of capacities such as thinking, doing, giving, sharing, reformulating and learning, essential elements for maintaining cognitive and emotional vitality [25,26].

Participation in group activities is an effective strategy for keeping the elderly socially active, and interaction with other people contributes significantly to improving quality of life. Personal motivation to join groups is a determining factor, since the desire to participate is what enables the elderly to fully enjoy the social, emotional and cognitive benefits that these experiences offer, promoting a more satisfying and healthy life [25,26].

In short, the expansion of units and the increase in vacancies represent not only an operational advance, but also an indicator of the program's institutional strengthening and social recognition. These factors, analyzed together, allow us to understand the initiative's evolution and consolidation over the years, pointing to paths toward its sustainability and replication in other contexts. Despite all the progress and achievements, the program faces some important challenges, such as the availability of physical space to accommodate all the program activities, which have been growing every semester, and the availability of financial resources to ensure the sustainability of the actions.

4. Conclusions

The activities offered by each UnAPI/UFMS center are carefully designed to address the preferences and demands of the local elderly population, which has directly contributed to the program's continuous expansion and social legitimacy. In the first semester of 2025, the initiative reached a significant milestone, with 69 extension, cultural and sports activities and 16 undergraduate courses, totaling 2,653 vacancies across six UFMS campuses. This growth

reflects not only operational improvement but also the strengthening of institutional capacity and recognition of the program as a reference in inclusive university extension.

Within the broader panorama of extension practices in higher education, UnAPI/UFMS stands out as an innovative and effective strategy for welcoming and including elderly people, facing daily challenges with an inclusive, creative, experiential and collaborative approach. The intergenerational environment fostered by the program promotes autonomy, independence and social interaction, while simultaneously creating opportunities for new friendships and exchanges of experiences and knowledge. In this sense, UnAPI fulfills the dual role of contributing to the well-being of its participants and strengthening the university's social responsibility.

Another relevant dimension concerns the program's potential for replication and adaptation in different contexts. Its interdisciplinary and intersectoral structure provides holistic care that encompasses health, education, digital inclusion, environmental awareness, cultural expression and civic participation. In addition, UnAPI's alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals reinforces its global relevance: it contributes to SDG 3 (Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). These connections demonstrate that the initiative goes beyond local impacts, positioning itself as a model of social and educational innovation with national and international resonance.

From an academic perspective, UnAPI also offers a privileged field for teaching, research and extension, fostering interaction between undergraduates and real, complex social contexts. This dynamic enables the development of ethical, professional and humanistic skills, while at the same time challenging stereotypes related to aging. The presence of elderly people in university spaces, whether in extension activities or in undergraduate courses, enriches the academic environment and strengthens intergenerational learning, proving that universities can be transformative agents in multiple dimensions of social life.

Despite the advances achieved, some challenges persist and require attention to ensure the sustainability of the initiative. The availability of adequate infrastructure, the securing of financial resources and the continuous training of educators and technicians are essential elements for maintaining quality and meeting the growing demand. In addition, the creation of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms can provide more robust evidence about the cognitive, emotional and social impacts of the program, consolidating its scientific legitimacy. By addressing these challenges, UnAPI will not only guarantee its permanence but will also reinforce its capacity to generate lasting social change.

In summary, the consolidation of UnAPI/UFMS over recent years demonstrates its importance as an institutional strategy that integrates science, culture, education and health in favor of active and inclusive aging. Its expansion in terms of activities, vacancies and campuses reflects the vitality of the program and its ability to respond to emerging social demands. At the same time, its innovative approach highlights the transformative role of universities in building more supportive, equitable and sustainable societies, where aging is recognized as a stage of life marked by dignity, participation and continuous learning.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Authors Contribution

All authors contributed substantially to the work. **K.O.R.C.** and **C.G.P.** were responsible for conceiving the research idea and writing the original draft. **L.C.C.**, **J.V.C.**, **M.E.S.M.**, **B.V.D.**, **L.C.M.G.**, and **V.X.L.S.** contributed to data collection, research, and review of specific sections. **C.C.B.F.Í.** and **A.S.S.** contributed to the writing and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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