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**EMPLOYABILITY IN A PORTUGUESE SOCIAL EDUCATORS  
SAMPLE**

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**Abstract**

Employability is an important factor in quality of life and well-being. However, studies on employability and the professional situation of social educators (SE) are still scarce. This study intends to characterize a sample of SE regarding the search time for the first job and their professional experience as SE. It also aims to explore variables that may be associated with employability, as well as reflect on the importance of the professional situation in SE' quality of life. This is an *ex post facto* study, with a convenience sample of 83 SE, mostly women (94%), with a mean age of  $30.24 \pm 9.64$ . An *ad hoc* questionnaire was used for the sociodemographic and professional characterization of the sample. To perform the statistical analysis, SPSS 25 was used with a 95% confidence level. Participants that have already worked as SE are 57.8%, with a mean search time for the first job of 11.7 months. A higher proportion of cases with work experience as SE was found among the older participants ( $p=.032$ ), and those who had volunteer experience ( $p=.010$ ). Age was also positively associated with a shorter search time for the first job in the social area ( $p<.001$ ). The results suggest that age and experience of volunteering can improve the SE' employability. It would be important to further investigate the role of personal and professional experience in accessing the profession, as well as the factors that promote the quality of life associated with SE practice.

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*Keywords:* Age, employability, social education, volunteering



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## 1. Introduction

Although the number of Higher Education graduates has been growing in Portugal, their professional situation has been deteriorating in the last two decades (Alves et al., 2017). Specifically, regarding the professional situation of social educators (SE), studies are very scarce.

The literature has reported that professional status and employability are very relevant variables in health, quality of life and well-being. In this sense, Bernston and Maklund (2007) found an association between perceived employability, general health and mental well-being. Unemployment and precariousness, on the other hand, seem to be associated with risk behaviors, lower quality of life rates and increased risks for mental health, like anxiety, depression and feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness (Norström et al., 2019; Thern et al., 2017; Vancea & Utzet, 2016). Therefore, unemployment and precariousness appear as important public health problems (Norström et al., 2019; Vancea & Utzet, 2016). Despite the consensus that there is a relationship between professional situation and quality of life and health, the causal direction of this association does not always seem to be clear, especially with regard to youth unemployment (Bartelink et al., 2020).

As is particularly noticeable with the global economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the availability of jobs depends, to a large extent, on macroeconomic circumstances. However, there seem to be individual variables that can increase employability. Age and experience of volunteering were, in this context, identified as potentially relevant factors.

Age can influence employability through mediators such as the opportunity to build formal and informal learning (Froehlich et al., 2015). Ramirez-Perez et al. (2015), found more communication and organization skills among a group of older entrepreneurs (26-35 years), when compared to younger participants (18-25 years). As Froehlich et al. (2015) suggest, age, in itself, seems to be a poor indicator of employability. It may, however, enable the maturation of relevant experiences for employability.

Volunteering can promote individual employability factors, since contributing to the development of skills, to the expansion of the contact network, to the construction of formal and non-formal learning, to the curriculum enrichment, to the increase of confidence and self-esteem, to health and well-being (Kamerade & Paine, 2014; Khasanzyanova, 2017; Paine et al., 2013; Rego et al., 2017). Volunteering can therefore be important in the development of soft skills, such as sociability and responsibility, the ability to deal with unexpected situations, the capacity to take initiative and to develop teamwork skills (Khasanzyanova, 2017; Rego et al., 2017). Emotional competences, such as emotional self-efficacy, also seem to contribute to increasing employability (Pool & Qualter, 2013). In this context, as promoters of employability among young graduates, employers seem to value factors like teamwork skills, extracurricular experience, professional maturity, social skills and the ability to solve problems (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018; Irwin et al., 2019). Likewise, higher education students seem to recognize volunteering and other extra-curricular activities as an asset in developing skills that make access to employment and postgraduate studies more likely (Barton et al., 2019; Sin et al., 2016). In this context, there are studies that suggest an association between volunteering experience and increased employability (Muldoon, 2009; Paine et al., 2013), especially as the age of the participants increases (Paine et al., 2013). Although there is abundant evidence about a relationship between volunteering experience and employability, this association tends to weaken when considered by itself, without mediators (Penny & Finnegan, 2019).

Although many of the employability's determinants do not depend on Higher Education Institutions (Suleman, 2018), its promotion, throughout the study cycles, is an increasing concern of the Institutions (Gamboa et al., 2014). This effort is recognized by students as an important factor in their transition to employment (Sin et al., 2016). Likewise, from the students' perspective, the support from Professors seems to be important in the transition to employment (Bakari & Hungra, 2018). Therefore, this study was developed to characterize the social educators' professional situation, and to explore the variables that can contribute to increase the employability, as well as quality of life and well-being.

## 2. Problem Statement

Employability and professional status are relevant factors in well-being and quality of life (Norström et al, 2019; Thern et al, 2017; Vancea & Utzet, 2016). However, research on the social educators' professional situation and employability is scarce, and no study on this subject has been found in Portugal.

## 3. Research Questions

Given the scarcity of research on the social educators' professional situation, this study intends to address the following questions:

What is the professional situation of Portuguese SE?

What variables can be associated with an employability increase of SE?

## 4. Purpose of the Study

The study aims to: a) characterize the professional situation of a SE sample, namely with regard to their professional experience in social area, and the time it takes to find their first job; b) explore variables that may be associated with employability; c) reflect on the importance of the professional situation for the SE quality of life.

## 5. Research Methods

This is an *ex post facto* study, based on a quantitative methodology.

### 5.1. Participants

The convenience sample consists of 83 SE from different regions of Portugal. The participants aged between 21-69 ( $M=30.24\pm9.64$ ) are mostly women (94%). A part (31.32%) still live with their parents, but almost half (49.40%) already have their own family, although the majority (73.5%) do not have children, yet. A portion (22.89%) did postgraduate studies, but the majority (77.10%) maintain the degree in Social Education as academic level.

General sample characterization is presented in Table 01.

**Table 1.** Characterization of participants

Variables			M	SD	Min.	Max.
<b>Age</b>			30.24	9.64	21	69
			n		%	
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Female</b>		78		94	
	<b>Male</b>		5		6	
<b>Live</b>	<b>With parents</b>		26		31.32	
	<b>Own family</b>		41		49.40	
	<b>Alone</b>		9		10.84	
	<b>With other people</b>		7		8.43	
<b>Children</b>	<b>Yes</b>		22		26.50	
	<b>No</b>		61		73.50	
<b>Education</b>	<b>Higher Education degree</b>		64		77.10	
	<b>Master</b>		13		15.66	
	<b>Other postgraduate studies</b>		6		7.23	

## 5.2. Materials

An *ad hoc* questionnaire was designed for collecting sociodemographic (age, gender, household, children) and professional (academic degree, professional status, first job search time) data.

## 5.3. Procedures

Participants were informed of the study's objectives, as well as about the voluntary, consented and anonymous nature of their participation. They had access to the questionnaire link by e-mail, and all data were anonymized. The only inclusion criterion was to have a degree in Social Education. Descriptive and inferential data analysis were performed in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM 25) with a confidence level of 95%. Non-parametric tests were used due to the characteristics of the sample (non-compliance of normality and/or homoscedasticity).

## 6. Findings

Descriptive statistics are presented first, in order to characterize the sample. Next, inferential statistics are explained to explore the variables that may be associated with employability.

### 6.1. Descriptive results

As it can be seen in Table 02, 57.8% of the participants have work experience as a SE. The mean search time for the first job as SE is  $11.7 \pm 17.39$  months (Min.=0, Max.= 82months). Almost half (49.40%) of the participants have volunteering experience.

**Table 2.** Descriptive results

Variables			M	SD	Min.	Max.
1st job search time			11.70	17.39	0	82
			n		%	
Work experience as a SE	No		35		42.20	
	Yes		48		57.80	
Volunteering experience	No		42		50.60	
	Yes		41		49.40	

## 6.2. Variables associated with employability

A higher proportion of cases with work experience as SE were found among the older participants ( $\chi^2 = 4.350$ ,  $p = .032$ ), and those who had volunteer experience ( $\chi^2 = 6.624$ ,  $p = .010$ ). With regard to the first job search time, no significant differences were found between the groups of participants with or without volunteering experience ( $U = 967$ ,  $p = .332$ ). However, a negative association was found between age and first job search time ( $r_s = -.435$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## 7. Conclusion

The results show, convergent to the literature (Froehlich et al., 2015; Muldoon, 2009; Paine et al., 2013; Ramirez-Perez et al., 2015), that employability among SE can increase with the experience of volunteering and with age. Age is also associated with a shorter first job search time.

Although the study's limitations, particularly the small sample size and the sampling technique, that advise caution, the results seem to suggest that personal and professional experience may be a relevant factor in accessing the profession of SE. The importance of these individual factors should not, however, diminish the relevance that macro variables, such as the economic situation or public employment policies, also have in accessing a professional situation compatible with a better quality of life (Kamerade & Paine, 2014).

Given the importance that the professional dimension seems to have in the quality of life, health and well-being (Bernston & Maklund, 2007; Norström et al., 2019; Thern et al., 2017; Vancea & Utzet, 2016), it is essential to further investigate the SE employability factors, as well as the variables that promote quality of life related to professional experience.

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