

Recognition, validation and certification of competences: the low-qualified and the learning paradigm in Portugal¹

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'New Opportunities' for qualification in Portugal

In the year 2006, in Portugal, there were about 3.5 million active (i.e. fit to work) people which hadn't finished the 12th grade of schooling. Of these, 2.6 million hadn't completed the 9th grade. However, the lack of formal qualifications didn't imply that the Portuguese haven't learnt (Melo, Lima & Almeida, 2002). Instead, it calls for our attention to the informal and non-formal learning processes that (have) silently shape(d) their knowledge (Lima, 2007).

In order to solve this formal qualification problem the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) system was implemented in 2000, nowadays representing the core strategy of the 'New Opportunities Program' - aimed at qualifying 1 million people until 2010 - and consisting also in the *main entrance* into Adult Education and Training (AET) provision (Gomes, 2006).

However successfully the Portuguese formal adult qualification problem might be *solved* until 2010 through the RVCC process and other derived education and training devices, special attention has to be drawn to the particular features of the low-qualified populations, namely in the context of the construction of knowledge-based societies and within a lifelong learning perspective. Research has shown that particular education and training climates can foster the individual and social development of these particular populations (e.g. Illeris, 2006), namely their locally-rooted nature, the development of innovative and creative strategies, the establishment and development of 'secure' relationships with the pedagogical teams, in the quest for attaining common goals that can increase the quality of the communities' existence (e.g. Gomes, 2007).

Due to the increase relevance of the RVCC system in Portugal, the whole adult education and training provision is now being reformed, so we will here try to summarize the most important features of each device, given the profound changes that are occurring as we write.

The RVCC process is, *grosso modo*, based in the collection, retrospection, scrutiny and assessment of the lifelong and lifewide individual learning contexts and

outcomes, through a process of construction of a 'Reflexive Learning Portfolio', in which the adult must express (mainly through written self-reports) and evidence (through all sorts of certificates, documents and other proofs) the competences defined for a particular level of academic and/or vocational qualification (according to the respective 'Key-Competences Framework' and/or specific profiles of vocational competences as defined in the 'National Qualifications Framework').

This process is conducted in collective and individual sessions, animated by the 'RVC Professional' and other trainers from the specific 'Key-Competences' areas. Finally, the portfolio is subject to a (public) presentation before a 'Certification Panel', after being discussed between with the pedagogical team and the adult. The 'Certification Panel' includes the whole pedagogical team and the 'external evaluator', someone who validates the process and acts as a link between the process outcomes and the community. This event can lead to a full certification (up to the 12th grade for academic certification and level III for vocational certification), or a partial certification (in which the adult is *oriented* towards other education and training devices in order to complete the qualification path).

The other main AET devices are the Adult Education and Training courses, based on the same principles of the RVCC process but including a wide array of training 'modules' which can be frequented by the adult in flexible and non-continuous ways, allowing 'partial validations', which are registered in his/her 'Individual Booklet of Competences'. These are much longer courses, and were previously conducted in periods of 1 to 2 years, mainly aiming at unemployed populations. Nowadays, their curricular organization might be subject to a more dynamic and flexible functioning.

Life is, finally, the raw-material of this process: the experience of recovery and review of life excerpts might trigger meaning-making processes (e.g. Singh, 2005) and intense individual experiences; or, on the other hand, might be perceived as uninteresting and invading. The pedagogical teams have therefore come to enrol in innovative strategies, instruments and methodologies in order to create new learning spaces, theoretically learner-centred and based on experiential learning models, targeting the *hard-to-reach* adult and low-qualified Portuguese population.

Methodology

The Ph.D. research that fundamentals this paper is aimed at exploring the relationships between AET, Training Climate, Participation Experiences and Psychological Empowerment (e.g. Gomes, Coimbra & Menezes, 2007a; 2007b). It has included both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, in order to wholly capture the nature of the psychological (individual) and collective phenomena being observed. In this paper we will try to synthesise and integrate much of the information analysed so far (see note 1).

We will, however, focus on the meanings inserted by the qualitative data in the research, and also pay special attention to the longitudinal qualitative data collected through the use of open-ended questions in questionnaires. One

important aspect of the mixed-method strategy is that the exercise of balancing the qualitative and quantitative data analysis can lead us to deeper meanings of the *heavily* coded statistical language, namely when it comes to obtaining information from a low-qualified population, whose first exclusion is the word itself (Mlekuz, 2002). In fact, during the longitudinal data collection (from the trainees), the first wave of questionnaires was clearly a challenge for the participants, while afterwards they reacted more 'comfortably' towards the pencil-and-paper instrument.

Before the longitudinal study, we conducted 4 focus-groups (1 with trainers and 3 with trainees), in order to inform the development of the instrument that would be used in the longitudinal study. The former included 4 observation moments, during 28 months. Parallel to the data collection, we also conducted 8 semi-structured interviews (3 RVC professionals, 4 RVC trainees and 1 regional coordinator). The RVCC participants group is clearly overrepresented (78%) when compared to AET courses participants (22%). Women are also overrepresented (56%) compared to men (44%), in the trainees sample.

The first conclusion that we can draw from the biographical data is that RVCC and AET courses are in fact composed by different populations, namely in what concerns their qualifications at the starting point, the employment status and the gender distributions in each device. There are more AET participants who haven't finished the 4th grade of schooling (about 30% against 10% in the RVCC process), which on its own, can lead us to reflect on specific methodologies, namely in the literacy domain, that have to be dealt with while working with these populations. As far as the employment statuses are concerned, we could observe that while in the RVCC process the majority of the adults was employed (49%), in the AET courses the whole population was unemployed (85%).

Taking into account the four waves of the longitudinal data collection which included participants from RVCC and AET courses, we will now explore the relationships between perceptions of the training climate and further participation in education and training, in order to understand whether these 'new' learning spaces are effectively also creating new opportunities for lifelong learning.

What are the impacts of AET? Do they address further participation in training?

After the first focus-groups, we performed content analysis of the trainees' discourse in order to understand whether there were any references to the will to engage as well as the actual engagement in further education and training, during and after the participation in AET devices. There was a significant number of reports from the trainees similar to '(...) I applied to continue studying, I am doing an ICT course, in the afternoons (...) before no, I didn't think about it' (TE12) or 'And now I want to do the 9th grade and I don't want to stop' (TE25).

Access to and development of ICT competences and resources is recurrently referred to as one of the most positive aspects of the training process, for example, the discovery of the Internet: 'I used to criticize my daughter (...) I like to go to the

Internet, searching for a lot of things, (...) in front of the computer, you even forget the time (...) it becomes addictive' (TE11); or the daily use of the computer : 'I did mine in (...) PowerPoint, and now (...) I always use the computer. Before I used a briefcase' (TE15). Another common training domain that the trainees get involved in is foreign language, namely English: 'I am taking an English course, but it's really a basic thing' (TE14).

Trainees generally seem to come out of this experience recognising and valuing learning in its different facets, contexts and results: 'It's the need to learn more.' (TE12). Some stretch the importance of the particular goals of the RVCC process and the need of further, more specific (and more structured) education and training options: 'finish RVC, and I will continue studying, do some training (...) what we learn here is little because I will lack the foundations of the 8th or the 9th grade (...) to continue to the 10th, 11th and 12th.' (TE6).

Consciousness of the importance of lifelong learning is an overall marked and transversal characteristic of the trainees' discourse, and most of the times attributed to the education and training process in which they were participating at the time: 'Look, I'll tell you it changed me, because when I finish here I (...) want to do another course' (TE11).

Longitudinal quantitative data: participation rates in further education and training across time

The Participation Experience Questionnaire (PEQ) includes three dimensions: degree of involvement; type of organizations and length of participation; and action-reflection opportunities. Analysing the second dimension previously referred, we tried to understand the variations of the participation rates across time, considering first the overall sample and secondly, analysing the individual curve for the RVCC and the AET courses participants, in order to capture eventual differences that could be behind the general picture of change. This is a preliminary analysis, given the 'semi-statistical' interpretations that can be drawn from reading and comparing percentages, but which, nevertheless, can be very useful to point out new (or reinforce old) routes of construal.

Results showed that there is, for both of the devices, a significant increase in the participation rates in further education and training across time: from 16.4% (in Time 1) to 60.9% (in Time 4), in the AET courses, and from 25.2% (in Time 1) to 37.3% (in Time 4) in the RVCC process. These are the people who manifested having participated in long-term devices (i.e. more than 6 months). One other evident conclusion from this analysis is that adults tend to participate in education and training not only more, but during larger periods of time.

We now have evidences that AET devices might be contributing to these adults' engagement in more structured and diverse learning activities (than their previous informal and non-formal ones), but we have to explore what is, after all, causing this change in the relationship between the individual adult and the learning process, its strategies, its contexts and its goals. Our next question explores a

hypothesis based on the belief that the training climate characteristics might be related to the transformation mentioned above.

Longitudinal quantitative data: perception of training climate across time

The Training Climate Scale for Low-Qualified Adults (TCS-LQA) includes 7 dimensions, composed by 4 items each: affiliation, equity, shared control, relevance, critical voice, autonomy and participation. The use of the statistical package SPSS and performance of the procedure of Analysis of Variance for Repeated Measures, allowed us to explore change across time in the perception of the training climate, as reported by the participants in the two devices.

Results have shown that there are significant differences through time and between the scores of the both devices [$F(2,382) = 12,196, p < 0.01$]: while perceptions of training climate rise constantly across time, the participants of the AET courses see it differently. From Time 1 to Time 2 there is a slight decrease, and from Time 2 to Time 3 there is a slight rise, however still lower than the initial score. Analysis of the means show us that AET courses participants start scoring higher than RVCC's, which could eventually be attributed to the high expectations that this disenfranchised (low-qualified and unemployed) populations can imprint in an opportunity for academic and vocational certification.

However, the change curve for the AET courses doesn't seem to be very encouraging, as it suggests that the overall perception of the training climate is not either balanced or very positive, when compared to the scores of the RVCC participants. This led us to our another question: which of the specific training climate variables are responsible for the general behaviour observed? And how do they perform at each time in both devices?

To answer this question, we ran Multivariate Analysis of Variance, in order to understand the significant differences between each dimension of the Training Climate at each moment. For Time 1 we only found significant differences between the scores of RVCC and AET courses for the affiliation variable [$F(1,269)=8.900, p < .01$]. In Time 2 however, we found significant differences in the scores for: participation [$F(1,191)=7.417, p < .01$], affiliation [$F(1,191)=37.576, p < .001$], autonomy [$F(1,191)=17.754, p < .001$] and equity [$F(1,191)=16.773, p < .001$]. Finally, in Time 3, we found significant differences for the same variables as in Time 2 - participation [$F(1,139)=4.134, p < .05$], affiliation [$F(1,139)=18.487, p < .001$], autonomy [$F(1,139)=5.647, p < .05$] and equity [$F(1,139)=17.159, p < .001$] - and moreover, for the critical voice variable [$F(1,139)=4.080, p < .05$].

Longitudinal qualitative data: relationships between training climate and further education and training

In order to explore this question, we could have used regression analysis and base our interpretations on a purely quantitative methodology, exploring the causal relationships between training climate and further participation in education and training. However, in this exercise, we used the respondents' answers to the open-ended questions in the instrument. In this analysis we focused on the main training

climate variables (shown to be significantly different for RVCC and AET in the previous analysis), This content analysis was theoretically driven, including the authors' definition of the five dimensions under exploration: Participation, affiliation, autonomy, critical voice and equity. Further analysis is surely needed, and the results presented here are to be considered preliminary.

The first comparison we ran was between Time 2 and Time 3, when we posed the following question: 'What is your global opinion about the training process so far?'. Results are showed that there is a very positive general opinion about the process, in spite of being considered very 'demanding' (mainly because of the amount of 'homework'). Learning ICT and putting it to practice is systematically reported as one of the most important aspects of the participation in AET devices. Some also actually referred the 'autonomy of the learner' in the definition of the process as being a very positive aspect. The most relevant and recurrent dimension is, however, affiliation, both from the AET courses participants: 'there was a delivery, both from the trainers and the trainees' (TE186); and from the RVCC: 'The whole process was a new experience which allowed me to (...) make new friendships' (TE237). It is, however, interesting to observe that AET courses participants complain about group conflicts 'there have been some group problems which have disappointed me a bit.' (TE29). These evidences confirm the existence of a critical period in Time 2, when almost all the scores in the Training Climate variables decrease in the AET group. Trainees also highlight the importance of the academic and vocational certification as vehicles to better job opportunities.

In Time 3, the overall opinion from Time 2 is repeated and reinforced, highlighting the importance of 'remembering old things' (good and bad) and valuing previously considered useless knowledge and competences. Remarkably, a significant number of trainees refer the urge to proceed in further qualification (12th grade) through the same process. Again relevant and recurrent, the affiliation dimension is constantly in the discourses: 'great trainers who always gave us incentives to attain our goals' (TR46); 'Very positive because the pedagogical team (...) is wonderful' (TR235); 'I have learnt a lot, beyond the support and friendship I have been getting' (TR212). Even the trainee that was previously bothered with the conflicts, in Time 2, is now positively evaluating the process and even wants to continue: 'I like all the subjects. I really hope that the 12th grade AET courses come out so that I can continue' (TR29).

Comparison between the two sets of responses can first lead us to note that there is a consistent pattern of positive opinions across time, and that they don't change much, except for the increasing motivation for further participation in education and training in Time 3 (near the end of the process). Once again, the affiliation dimension emerges as one of the most important characteristics of the training climate of AET courses and RVCC.

The most evident participation outcome is indeed, as reported, related to the recurrent involvement in further education and training, as a consequence of participating in AET devices (namely in the ICT, Maths and English domains),

which can suggest that they might in fact be contributing to the engagement of these low-qualified adults in the lifelong learning paradigm. Last but not least, come the important relationships between the trainees and the pedagogical teams, which, once again, appear as the context from which the individual reported changes seem to emerge.

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