ON THE OPENING OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS TO NEW PUBLICS: THE PORTUGUESE CASE[1]

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Resumo

A recente "abertura" das instituições de ensino superior (IES) a "novos públicos" suscita interrogações, desde logo a da transformação (ou não) de um subsistema de ensino muitas vezes descrito como conservador. Os saberes — válidos, mas por reconhecer — de que os adultos são portadores poderão promover este *convite* à mudança.

Este artigo, numa viagem por três esferas — individual, social e institucional —, intenta explorar alguns dos inúmeros sentidos e significados que os adultos constroem com relação ao ensino superior, sublinhando os obstáculos e os aspectos facilitadores da aprendizagem.

O plano de investigação aqui apresentado procura traçar um quadro conceptual e crítico do problema, com base na perspectiva de directores das IES, docentes e aprendentes adultos. Conquanto a investigação privilegie o nível local, das instituições e dos indivíduos, considerar-se-á também os dispositivos e processos de "regulação" nacional e transnacional desta oferta educativa.

As dimensões de análise serão os processos e produtos de aprendizagem dos adultos, as metodologias de avaliação, as práticas peda-

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gógicas, os planos curriculares, os mecanismos de orientação (profissional e pedagógica) e de apoio — nomeadamente tutorial —, bem como o funcionamento e organização dos cursos, dos programas e das instituições.

Palavras-chave: *ensino superior, educação e formação de adultos, novos públicos, reconhecimento e validação de competências*

Proem

"[...] *a Universidade caminha, irresistivelmente, para a universalidade: isto é, para um aumento, de dia para dia mais vasto, dos seus frequentadores, para um número, cada vez mais amplo e variado, de disciplinas e de formas de saber humano, e para a adopção, consequente, de um pluralismo, pedagógico e metodológico, de investigação, criação e transmissão, sempre, tendencialmente, mais diversificado, tendo apenas, como grande traço unitivo, o sentido da Verdade.*

[University walks, irresistibly, towards universality: that is, towards an increase, vaster day-to-day, of its regular attendants, towards a number increasingly wider and a more assorted range of subjects and modes of human knowledge, and, therefore, towards as adoption of a wider pluralism, both pedagogically and methodologically, in research production and transmission, in more diversified way, taking, as the great trait of union, the sense of Truth][2]"

Manuel Antunes, 1973

Probably, we have never been so close to the "universality" and to the "pedagogical and methodological pluralism" of the University, as predicted by Manuel Antunes in 1973. The institutionalization of the Lifelong Learning paradigm (cf., for instance, Abukari, 2005; Antikainen, 2001; Fejes & Andersson, 2008) has contributed to increase the visibility, and subsequently, the value (not to say quotation) of the non formal and informal learning (sometimes, as a *trick* to *disguise* statistics and climb some steps in international rankings!).

Whether we admit the existence of a World Education System, converging on its most significant aspects, whether we consider that harmony is only superficial or apparent (Azevedo, 2007), the "opening" of higher education to "new publics[3]" gains centrality in the (world) education agenda (cf., for example, Abukari, 2005; Askling, Henkel & Kehm, 2001; Correia & Mesquita, 2006; Fejes & Andersson, 2008; Peters, 2005; Yoshimoto, Inenaga & Yamada, 2007). It is thus created the context to the emergence, in Portugal (as in other countries),

[2] In this paper, we propose some translation attempts, aware of how difficult the exercise is.

[3] Not forgetting other groups as children and youth (on Open Days, Junior Universities...), but especially adults — and those are the ones that make up our object of study.

of legislation (e.g., Decree-Law no. 64/2006, of March 21, which regulates especially adequate adult-oriented devices to assess the capability to attend higher education [*sic*] of 23 aged or older candidates and without the traditional academic qualifications and national tests) and of diverse education and training formats (free courses, summer schools, senior courses...).

Historically, and according to Magalhães, Amaral and Tavares (2009), but also Amaral & Magalhães (2009), the Portuguese access policies to higher education can be organized along three different periods. The first, "more is better", lasted 20 years, from 1974[4] until the mid 1990s. It was the time[5] to expand. In fact, the enrolments increased from 57 000 students to over 340 000. The second period (1997/98-2007/2008), "more is a problem", was triggered off by the decline of the private higher education sector, followed later (in 2003/04) by an annual enrolment decrease in the public sector. The third and present period, called "more but different", represents the emergent shift from equality to equity, and from quantity to quality, the diversification of supplied programmes and the focus on a more diverse public (Magalhães et al., 2009).

Ipso facto, there are higher education institutions (HEI, from now on), in Portugal, where, due to the scarceness of "traditional" candidates, vacancies have been filled in by students "over 23"[6] years old. It seems plausible that the deciding factor has been the "institutional survival" (Amaral & Magalhães, 2009; Osborne, 2003), in additional to a progressive social assimilation of a lifelong learning culture. Therefore, one can ask if the advertised "opening" has been mainly opportunism or opportunity (Nóvoa, 2007)? Are HEI trying to "change" the students instead of their own practices (Santiago, Rosa & Amaral, 2002)? Whatever the cause of the sudden interest devoted to "new publics", the effect has an inestimable potentiality — and this is why it is a priority, as stated in the National Debate of Education (CNE, 2007).

By the way, the discussion should focus more on the admission (we prefer to say welcome)[7] rather than on the access issue[8] and, most of all, on the post-recruitment process. In Portugal, this is not the first time that adults have access to higher education. The former "ad-hoc national examination" allowed the

[4] The year of the Carnation Revolution, on April 24, which consummated the fall of the dictatorship regime.

[5] Nonetheless, the authors subdivide this period in three different periods.

[6] "Formula" that became widespread.

[7] "Debates about higher education and adults have tended to focus on issues of access, to the detriment of accessibility" (Murphy & Fleming, 2000, p. 78).

[8] As Benseman, Coxon, Anderson and Anae asserted, traditionally, "the debate about participation of under-represented social groups in tertiary education has focused primarily on recruitment — at least getting 'non-traditional' students into educational institutions and on to the enrolment forms" (2006, p. 147).

access to students over 25 years old and without the upper secondary school or lower levels certificates.

Therefore, from this perspective, what challenges HEI is the improvement of mature students welcoming methodologies. Receive and deeply respect each person (amongst the "new publics") cannot be reduced to mere provision of access and admission, but stepping beyond a set of (most of the time, rhetorical) techniques and strategies designed to hit the "target group"[9].

Assuming that in the learning realm, the raw material is not reality as it might be objectively organized but reality as a both social and personal representation subjectively constructed[10] (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/2004), what meanings are being constructed by adults confronting this reality? Not exclusively for reasons concerned with the (almost) nonexistence of research on the Portuguese case[11], we will try to outline a brief theoretical framework.

Do we know the meanings of education for those who seek it?

> "However you may be, be your own source of experience! Throw off your discontent about your nature; forgive yourself your own self, for you have in it a ladder with a hundred rungs, on which you can climb to knowledge."
> Friedrich W. Nietzsche, 1878/1996, p. 174

> "Being recognized, should it occur, would for everyone be to receive the full assurance of his or her identity, thanks to the recognition by others of each person's range of capacities."
> Paul Ricoeur, 2005, p. 250

What are the motivations that attract and retain adults in higher education? Research tends to ground the discussion of this crucial issue on a disjunctive conjunction, resembling a contest with "either" in the middle.

On one side, those studies which represent students as pragmatic, instrumental and goal-directed (Bowl, 2001; Briedenhann, 2007), with clear purposes

[9] As Joaquim Azevedo has said, the language that we use in education is distressing and even disappointing — and more appropriate for an armed conflict (Azevedo, 2009)!

[10] Norbert Elias said: "The we-identity of people, though it certainly always remained present [since the Renaissance], was now often overshadowed or concealed in consciousness by their I-identity" (1987/2001, p. 197). For Coimbra and Menezes (2009), nevertheless, it "was the gradual disappearance and loss of power of these meta-narratives (and of their oppressive nature) that led to the existential necessity of the psychological construction of individual (autonomously or hetero-supported) life narratives in an attempt to find meaning for personal existence".

[11] The rare exceptions are, for instance, Cabrito (2008), and Curado (2009). However, it must be said that policies are very recent. Henceforth, an exponential growth of works about this subject is expected.

for participation (Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm & Dirkx, 1999), such as career development (Dodge & Derwin, 2008), job security (Abukari, 2005), to learn something applicable to work (Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm et al., 1999), skills enhancement (Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2007), to be a role model and encourage children (Briedenhann, 2007; Reay, Ball & David, 2002), to be perceived by family members as educated (Briedenhann, 2007), to make a contribution to society (Reay et al., 2002), as well as a strong desire for a sense of community and sociability (Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2007).

On the other side, studies which evoke "joy" (Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2007) or "love of learning" (Reay et al., 2002), reinvention of selves and intellectual stimulation (Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2007), self-actualization, lifelong ambition and self-esteem (Briedenhann, 2007), as well as existential questioning (Walters, 2000). One can say that these are aims too, but not as pragmatic and instrumental as the previous ones.

Motivation would be better described with non-mutually exclusive conjunctions. There are both intrinsic (personal satisfaction, being goal oriented, providing a role model for children, desiring a better life, being dedicated to learning rather than earning a grade, running against time, to show to others that one can succeed) and extrinsic motivational factors (paying for college and seeing college as an investment, respond to significant others expectations, including instructors) (Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, Long & Bradley, 1999). Education is a (and has) space and time not only to love learning but also to seek a better life.

These and other meanings may play a major role in the characterization of the plural "new publics". The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (1993, cit. in Lueddeke, 1997, pp. 212-213) proposed four broad and overlapping categories: (i) "deferred beginners, in their 20s who are likely to have some work and life experience and enter the system later than is usual", (ii) "returners, typically in their 30s with considerable work and life experience, who seek in higher education a new direction", (iii) "developers, between 30 and 50, frequently interested in further professional development or updating their current skills", and (iv) "enrichers, who may pursue education in order to prepare for community roles or retirement".

Kasworm (2003), in turn, *heard* five different voices — (i) the entry voice, (ii) the outside voice, (iii) the cynical voice, (iv) the straddling voice and (v) the inclusion voice —, with *variegated* belief structures about knowledge (academic and/or real-world [*sic*]), learning actions, professor actions, classroom activities, evaluation strategies and learning community.

Costa and Lopes (2008), at last, identified eight main typical pathways: (i) trend or expected, (ii) counter-trend or unexpected, (iii) education-focused, (iv) with inflections, (v) with transition problems (particularly among young stu-

dents), (vi) with conciliation difficulties (between life spheres), (vii) with integration difficulties in higher education (at the institutional and relational levels), and (viii) with problems in the modes of studying.

In respect to meaning making, it is worth to understand how subjects define success — so as to better understand and help disassemble the barriers which they are facing to reach it. According to Donaldson, Graham, Martindill et al. (1999), most of them distinguish between success in college and success in learning. The former is associated with others' definitions of knowledge (e.g., meeting instructors' expectations, getting the degree, making good grades) and the latter is defined by adult learners in terms of their ownership of personal conceptions of knowledge (e.g., learn what one wants and can apply).

And success sets the tone for the next part.

Obstacles and facilitators of learning

"[...] *com o cansado espanto de quem encontrou a chave mas não sabe da porta.*
[with the tired amazement of who found the key but doesn't know where the door is]"
Mia Couto, 2008

What factors contribute (or not) to the success and/or to the quality of learning? From our point of view, they *gravitate* around three main spheres — the individual, the social and the institutional —, although the frontiers between spheres are often diffuse and purely analytical conveniences.

Individual sphere

Some studies refer to the importance of having or developing adequate study skills (Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm et al., 1999; Murphy & Fleming, 2000). Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008) enunciate the value of developing new ways of learning, while Donaldson, Graham, Martindill et al. (1999) emphasize maturity, which permits the adult undergraduate students to concentrate on learning rather than on other developmental tasks that have been associated with "conventional age" students. These authors also highlight the centrality of the classroom, as a stage for subjects to connect what they learn with what they already know as a result of their prior or concurrent experiences off the campus.

It seems worthy of note, too, the lack of knowledge that adult students have about university (Christie et al., 2008) and the ensuing lack of awareness of support services (Tones, Fraser, Elder & White, 2009).

In respect to behaviours, however, the references reviewed point out, in general, the performance[12] and the "support needs", correlated (or not) with gender, age and socioeconomic status (SES). Thus, and exemplifying, females perform better than males, older students perform better than younger students (Cantwell, Archer, Bourke, 2001), mature-aged students from low SES backgrounds (who reported additional barriers including disabilities, difficulties accessing the campus due to living in a remote location, and the devaluation of education by family and friends, and mainly the inevitable deficit of social capital), as well as mature-aged students over the age of 45 years, emerged as groups in probable need of further support to promote retention (Tones et al., 2009), white females with high income and educational attainment are the most likely to participate in higher education and, finally, women with lower incomes and levels of education also participate at higher rates than their male counterparts (Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2007). As stated by Tones et al. (2009), the year level and the enrolment status (both fulltime versus part-time employment and internal versus external employment) should also be considered when it comes to understand the support needed, because first and second-year students view services as more helpful than third and fourth-year or postgraduate students, and internal, fulltime and undergraduate students report greater service use, more frequent barriers of higher impact, and greater relevance of new services proposed (Tones et al., 2009).

Last but not the least, Donaldson, Graham, Martindill et al. (1999) stress the concept of self-monitoring, that is comprised of management (of time, for example) and learning strategies (e.g., repetition, working problems, outline chapters, taking notes, writing, cramming, preparing in advance, using mnemonic devices, limiting focus and not trying to consume everything, as well as seeking help through support groups), monitoring of context (selecting a special place to study or studying alone) and monitoring of self (knowing one's own strengths and weaknesses).

Anyhow, the individual sphere is not complete in the absence of emotions, even because "being and becoming a university student is an intrinsically emotional process" (Christie et al., 2008, p. 567). Nevertheless, the feelings of mature students in higher education are hardly *patternable*. Despite that, they can be arranged in a continuum of negative and positive feelings, with a concentration near its first pole[13]. In the studies reviewed, we found feelings of excitement and

[12] Is it urgent to determine who performs better... and worse? It could be, but only if we are reinforcing the supreme purpose of education: to contribute to the perfectibility of each and every one — or in a cynical way, to (re)produce social stratification.

[13] Particularly among students with no previous familial experience of higher education (Christie et al., 2008).

exhilaration (at the beginning of the course), pleasure and self-esteem (Christie et al., 2008), transformative breakthrough, empowerment, emancipation and liberation (Brookfield, 1999). Beyond that (and the list is extensive!), just feelings of loss, pain, dislocation, displacement, anxiety, guilt, alienation, uncertainty, frustration, exclusion, isolation, loneliness, powerlessness, disillusionment (when courses are more generic than students would like), dissatisfaction, insecurity about academic standards, being too old and not having confidence in one's own academic abilities, fragmentation of the self into private (being a partner or parent) and public spheres (the student), strong fear of failure and of past humiliations being repeated (Bowl, 2001; Briedenhann, 2007; Christie et al., 2008; Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm et al., 1999; MacDonald & Stratta, 1998; Murphy & Fleming, 2000; Walters, 2000).

It is not surprising, then, that the adult students' representations of higher education are also predominantly negative. They see it as an "alien" and "traumatic" world[14] (Bowl, 2001), a "shock" (Bowl, 2001; Christie et al., 2008), a set of dispositional and institutional barriers, such as unwelcoming institutions (Tett, 1999), and "an intimidating place where many decisions have been made based on the academic and social needs as these affect the younger population, not the personal and professional expectations of those adults who work and have family responsibilities" (Lueddeke, 1997, p. 213). Tones et al. (2009) pointed up the students' concerns about coping with academic challenges after a break in their studies, and Bowl (2001) reported complaints of institutional marginalization and unresponsiveness.

The professors are under fire as well, whether they feel "threatened" by a mature student with extensive experience or whether the assessment, being unclear and ambiguous, frustrate and humiliate adult learners (Briedenhann, 2007).

In this way, Stephen D. Brookfield (1999), without denying the presence of "heady moments" in the stories of adult students, accentuates their feelings of "impostorship" (adult students often believe that they don't possess the talent or the right to become college students), "loss of innocence" (the innocence that *told* them that the college would change their lives and unveil the "truth", the functioning of the world and who they really are *versus* the reality that tells them

[14] In the novel "If on a winter's night a traveller", Italo Calvino takes the reader by the hand through this same world: [...] you have a fear of getting lost in the University labyrinths . . . you wander lost through those austere walls . . . Reader, I know you too bad to know if you move with indifferent safety inside an University or if old traumas or pondered options make a universe of students and teachers seems a nightmare to your sensitive and sensible spirit. In any case, nobody knows the Institute that you are looking for, send you from the basement to the fourth floor, all the doors that you open are wrong, you go back confused, it seems that you got lost in the book with blank pages and you can't get out (1979/2002, pp. 42-43) [translated by ourselves from the Portuguese version].

"to ask the right questions, not to find the right answers" [p. 13]) and "cultural suicide" (when adult learners, for the reason of being critically reflective — sometimes regarding commonly held assumptions —, are excluded by families, peer groups, and communities). Hopefully, there's one way out of this "dark underbelly of the inspirational rhetoric of adult learning" (p. 11), and it winds from the "belonging to an emotionally sustaining peer learning community — a group of peers who have also been experiencing impostorship, running the risk of committing cultural suicide, and struggling with feelings of lost innocence. . . . These groups are spoken of as a 'second family', as 'the only people who really understand what I'm going through', and as 'my partners in crime'." (p. 14)

We are by now in the very inside of our second sphere: the social one.

Social sphere

This sphere could be summed up in three main axes: (i) the peer-groups and the development of communities of learners, in- and out-of classes (Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Benseman et al., 2006; Briedenhann, 2007; Christie et al., 2008; Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm et al., 1999; Donaldson, Graham, Martindill et al., 1999; Tett, 1999; Tones et al., 2009); (ii) the support or the pressures from family, friends, job (Benseman et al., 2006; Briedenhann, 2007; Costa & Lopes et al., 2008; Dodge & Derwin, 2008; Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm et al., 1999; Donaldson, Graham, Martindill et al., 1999; Murphy & Fleming, 2000; Tett, 1999). According to Tones et al. (2009), the family responsibilities were most likely to affect the studies of 35–44 year olds and of females; and (iii) the desire to be role models and encourage children (Benseman et al., 2006; Briedenhann, 2007; Donaldson, Graham, Martindill et al., 1999).

Institutional sphere

The last sphere comprehends two different layers: the layer of functioning and organization, and that of the pedagogical practices. Let's start with the former, apparently less thorny to settle.

HEI must provide information, useful and available facilities and guidance services, encouraging and interesting staff, adequate educational ethos, greater flexibility in delivery formats, removal or reduction of structural barriers related to outreach, programming, scheduling, and transportation (Benseman et al., 2006; Briedenhann, 2007; Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm et al., 1999; Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2007; Tett, 1999; Tones et al., 2009) — in a word, support; and literature seems to *consensualize* around it. Is there any reference that doesn't mention it? Is it possible to address this question without take into account the support adults do (or don't?) need?

Can HEI turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to adults' financial problems, poverty, difficulties with the benefits system, pressures, and lack of time and of childcare (Abukari, 2005; Benseman et al., 2006; Bowl, 2001; Briedenhann, 2007; Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2007; Murphy & Fleming, 2000; Reay et al., 2002; Tett, 1999; Tones et al., 2009)? And what can HEI do to diminish these problems? It is hard to say, but far harder to do. As Ulrich Beck (1992) might said, are we claiming that each institution search — and find — alone a solution for all these systemic contradictions?

The quandary has now begun. It is absolutely necessary to deepen analysis and go through the layer of pedagogical practices, for the purpose of getting closer to the core. Among those, the pedagogical relation is undoubtedly of utmost importance (is there a more compelling reason for professors to be in the crossfire?). Teachers' following characteristics seem to have an appreciable effect on adult students' success: be respectful and caring (Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm et al., 1999), be passionate about subjects, motivate students, reward their efforts, help subjects fit their studies into their larger patterns of adult life, actively involve students, assume that students are heterogeneous (Donaldson, Graham, Martindill et al., 1999), provide high-quality feedback, as quick as possible, negotiate and discuss the learning process (Briedenhann, 2007), prefer flexible and responsive teaching methods (essay writing, for instance, can cause significant problems for mature students), tell adult learners what is expected of them (Murphy & Fleming, 2000) and have high expectations (Donaldson, Graham, Martindill et al., 1999).

Other main dimension, and related with the preceding one, is assessment. As said before, it can frustrate, humiliate — and even eliminate the *human person*. Pushing it to the limit, "Knowles thought that the act of a teacher giving a grade was incongruous with the adult's self-directedness. He saw external assessment as a sign of disrespect and dependency, and prescribed a process of learner self-evaluation, in which the educator helped the learners get evidence for themselves about their progress towards their educational goals" (Cretchley & Castle, 2001, p. 493).

What is in dispute here, and again, is meaning construction. Besides, and belike, isn't it the distinctive feature of human life (cf. Bruner, 1990/2008) and, as a result, of education and training (Nóvoa, 1988)? What does assess means, if not to produce and recreate meanings about others and ourselves? We would like to quote James Joyce, a master of meaning making (and remaking), who wrote, somewhere in "Ulysses": "Please tell me what is the real meaning of that word?" (1922/1989, p. 107). What is a human being other than meanings — stories, narratives, memories, experiences, values, desires?

It's almost impossible to think of adult learners' assessment without mentioning the process of recognition and validation of competences (RVC)[15]. Notwithstanding the centrality of this theme, and the profuseness of literature about it, the critical analyses and the empirical studies aren't plentiful (Alesi & Kehm, 2000; Cantwell et al., 2001; Pires, 2002). Conversely, bibliography is often descriptive and prescriptive (Andersson & Fejes, 2005, but also Brinke, Sluijsmans, Brand-Gruwel & Jochems, 2008), pamphletlike and undisguisedly marked by an ideological bias[16].

The RVC process is not neutral and inevitably beneficial. It contains innumerable risks. In the taxonomy of Luís Imaginário (1998), different risks correspond to different types of competences evaluation[17]: static and not dynamic evaluation (evaluation of the past, unable to drop hints towards the future) — risk of staticism; assessment-evaluation (examination of competences regarding an explicit or implicit framework) — risk of normativism; purely cognitive or scholar evaluation (a reductionist approach to the competence construct) — risk of cognitivism; purely technical evaluation (reduction of competence to know-how) — risk of technicality; psychological evaluation (of motivations, of personality...) — risk of psychologism; assisting evaluation (the professional "helps" continuously the individual) — risk of assistentialism; vocational project unrealistic (focus on a "vocational dream" of the individual) — risk of unrealism; vocational project reduced, concealed (this is the reverse case of the previous. Focus, at this time, is on labour market, regardless of individual) — risk of practicism; and, at last, standardized evaluation (this evaluation type all the others) — risk of standardization. Pouget, Sallic and Le Scouiller (n. d.) stress the risk of *instrumentalization* of narratives into "products", measured, codified and validated by institutions. Andersson and Fejes (2005), on the other hand, draw attention to the process of RVC "as a technique for fabricating the adult learner". For Cretchley and Castle (2001), too, it can become a regulatory practice[18].

[15] The complete and unmanageable "formula" would be identification, assessment, recognition, validation and, eventually, certification of competences (IARVCC), so, abbreviating, recognition and validation of competences (RVC). There are, nonetheless, innumerable linguistic variations around this concept: recognition of prior learning (RPL), accreditation of prior (experiential) learning (APEL or APL), prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR)...

[16] One can find in Cretchley and Castle (2001), two illustrations of this idea: "RPL is best understood as a movement or cause, rather than as a coherent theory" (p. 488), and "Davenport suggests that many of andragogy's assumptions need to be empirically tested, instead of being accepted as gospel by true believers" (p. 494).

[17] The Portuguese concept, *balanço*, means not only evaluation but also the swing movement of a seesaw.

[18] It is curious and indispensable to take up again the thought of Hannah Arendt, who said: "Since one cannot educate adults . . . there is a pretense of education, when the real purpose is coercion without the use of force" (1954/1993, p. 177).

A further critical risk is the devaluation of what adults can learn and acquire, in favour of an overvaluation of prior learning[19] (is this occurring in Portugal with the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences of elementary and secondary level?). Is study forgettable? Can or should we avoid the sweat of the soul, in the words of George Steiner (Steiner & Spire, 2004, p. 47)? Is it possible to discern the praise of study from the stigmatization of "undereducated"?

Hence, the RVC concept is homonymic (Amorim, 2008): beneath the same "idea"[20] of recognition and validation of prior learning are unmistakable meanings and modes. Apropos, some very interesting RVC models (or, more generally, of adult education) described by Bailie[21] (1999), Breier[22] (2005), Butterworth[23] (1992), Canário[24] (2000), Cavaco[25] (2009), Harris[26] (1999), Sans Fernández[27] (2006), *inter alia*, should be underlined.

Adult learners' entrance in higher education and RVC's inevitableness (be it more or less formal and frugal) are radically defying the nature and locus of knowledge[28] (Pouget & Osborne, 2004, but also Cretchley & Castle, 2001; Evans, 2000; Pires, 2002). What will be the result — for learners (not only adults[29]) and for professors, for institutions... and for knowledge?

[19] Neuroscience research has given inspiring examples, like the works of Alexandre Castro-Caldas (2002, for example) about the illiterate brain, but also the studies of Cabeza, Anderson, Locantore and McIntosh (who say that "high-performing older adults counteracted age-related neural decline through a plastic reorganization of neurocognitive networks" [2002, p. 1394]) and Brayne et al. ("The associations between neuropathological variables and clinical dementia differed according to the 'dose' of education such that more education reduced dementia risk largely independently of severity of pathology" [2010, p. 2210]). Inspiring and magisterial is "The man without qualities", by Robert Musil, where a character intriguingly says: one considers that it is more important to know the reason why we don't know something than know what we don't know (1941/2009, p. 287) [translated by ourselves]. In this case, we would say that one considers that it is more important to know what we learnt than learn what we don't know.

[20] As noted above, in spite of its different "formulas".

[21] Here, we only have space to present the names of the models: "social vision", "access", "diagnostic learning", "assessment", "accreditation" and "awards".

[22] "Technical/market", "critical/radical", "liberal/humanist" and "disciplinary-specific".

[23] "Credit exchange model" and the "developmental model".

[24] Continuous professional training, literacy and recurrent education, local development and sociocultural animation.

[25] Social orthopaedics (an obvious Foucaultian concept), individual qualification, organizational development, leisure occupation/animation, community intervention.

[26] "Procrustean", "learning and development", "radical" and "Trojan horse".

[27] *Literater* [the one who makes somebody literate], social dialogical and economical productive.

[28] Together with the inspiration from Duchamp, this fact could have instigated Amalfitano (a character from the novel "2666", by Roberto Bolaño) when he hung a treatise on a clothes line, so that it could capture two or three things from life.

[29] It passes through literature the idea that the well succeeded experiences would benefit not only adult learners, but also the entire community (Bowl, 2001; Cabrito, 2008; MacDonald & Stratta, 1998; Reay et al., 2002).

The research plan

The theoretical framework that guides our research is multifaceted and of a multidisciplinary inspiration, although the prominence of Social Pedagogy, whose major concern is to facilitate the access of each citizen, fulfilling their specific learning (that are of life) needs, by means of actions and policies very flexible, of proximity and of very variable-geometry (Azevedo, 2006, p. 42).

Our main goal is to contribute to better know and understand — and, afterwards, to epitomize — the very heterogeneous "new publics" (in terms of age, interests, qualifications, but also meanings, motivations...) and the educative initiatives directed to them (very diverse, as well: undergraduate programmes, short courses, e-learning, modular courses, summer schools, senior courses...).

Besides, we intend to (i) cross perspectives and signalize convergences and divergences within and between analytical levels — transnational, national and local (HEI, professors, adult learners) —, in respect to speeches and practices, (ii) attempt a positive definition of "new publics" (and of what they know and learn) — as a way of overcome the widespread negativity: non-traditional students, non-formal learning, non-qualified adults[30], (iii) find differences between HEI, with regard to the institution type (university or polytechnic) and its funding nature (public or private), in addition to subject field, (iv) carry out a survey of "good practices", (v) adopt a position on the urgency of place this subject on education agenda, and (vi) propose a set of recommendations, based on the needs, expectations and motivations of learners, but also in the "perspectives" of transnational organizations, state and administration, HEI' boards of trustees and professors.

We are also considering the feasibility of creating an online community (website, blog or other electronic platform) of "new publics" to promote sharing, discussion, mutual support between learners and teachers — and, of course, data collection[31], feeding back the other research methods with new elements. It is expected that this *method*'s openness, flexibility and lesser fixed package-type should enable us to get closer to the subjects and allow the (off the) record of different voices and perspectives. The aim is, in sum, to *hear* private and profound self-disclosures.

Moreover, the research comprehends the critical analysis of "recommendations" with international repercussion (those from European Commission, European Council, UNESCO, Eurydice, OECD, *inter alia*), of documents produced by the Portuguese governments and public administration, and by the

[30] As Azevedo said elsewhere: since when and until when is non beginning of meeting and dialogue, of teaching and learning (?) (2009, p. 5).

[31] If this is not possible, we will try to get information also through informal contacts.

HEI, that is, universities and polytechnics from the public and the private sectors (e.g., strategic plans, reports...). It is our intention to do semi-structured interviews with HEI directors and teachers, as well as with learners that compose the "new publics", but, with these, we expect to organize focus groups and administer a questionnaire.

With respect to analytic dimensions, the study has, for now, these five: (i) learning (obstacles and facilitators), (ii) assessment (of prior learning and of learning outcomes) methodologies, (iii) pedagogical practices (e.g., welcome, guidance, mediation, attendance, study support, tutorship), (iv) curricular plan and frameworks and (v) functioning and organization (schedules, assiduousness, flexibility, modularization, diversity, adequacy, articulation).

Epilogue

"[...] a bridge doesn't sustain only from one side, Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier will never do a bridge suspended only from one side."
Julio Cortázar, 1963/2008, p. 480
[translated by ourselves]

"Bridges are useless unless they span the whole distance between the shores"
Zygmunt Bauman, 2003, p. 30

Are HEI truly and widely opening their doors? Or it's just an "organized hypocrisy" (as Nils Brunsson said), nothing (or little) more than a rhetorical exercise? Aren't we betting (and running the risk of losing), thus, the person in each and every student? Are HEI really involved or are they still "on the periphery of present debates on this issue" (Alesi & Kehm, 2000, p. 285)?

In any case, solutions of the past do not meet the present and future challenges. The metamorphosis seems unavoidable and urgent, all the more so because the advantage is in favour of those HEI that quickly reach excellence in the care and support of each and every person among these "new publics".

By way of précis, Roger Dale (2008) — in a text that explores the changing meaning of the phrases "Europe of Knowledge" and "modernization of the University" since the Bologna Declaration — states that "we have a transformed world — and all without changing a word". Regarding the Portuguese case, could the play on words win acuteness if we change it to: we have transformed words — and all without changing *a* world?

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[32] This title (and some other ones) was translated by ourselves, which means that may not exist in English version.

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Abstract

The recent "opening" of higher education institutions (HEI) to "new publics" raises some questions: first of all, that of the transformation (or not) of an education subsystem often described as conservative. The unsolved problem of the lack of devices directed to the recognition of adults' prior learning (at a higher education level) might work as a challenge that could contribute to solve this problem, that is, the knowledge (often unrecognised by the subjects themselves, but also by others, namely through formal devices of recognition) acquired and developed by adults, in their lives and with their lives, together with the needs that they seek to satisfy through education and training, could *invite* HEI to change.

This paper intends to explore part of the wide range of meanings that adults construct concerning higher education, stressing the obstacles and facilitators of adult learning, in a journey through three spheres: individual, social and institutional.

The research plan presented here intends to draw a conceptual and critical framework of the problematic, based on the perspectives of HEI directors, professors and adult learners. Even though the study privileges the local level, both concerning the institutions and the individuals, the national and transnational governance devices and processes have been considered as well.

The analytic dimensions embrace the processes and products of adult learning, the assessment methodologies, the pedagogical practices, the curricular plans and frameworks, the (career and pedagogical) guidance and support devices — namely tutorship —, as well as the courses, programmes and institutions' functioning and organization.

Keywords: *higher education, mature students, adult learners, adult students, non-traditional students, recognition and validation of competences, recognition of prior learning, accreditation of prior experiential learning*