

The effectiveness of adult education context in Portugal

Abstract

This article approaches adult education context in Portugal assuming as main objective the presentation and discussion of the actual state and effectiveness by analysing its applicability and consequences on three different perspectives, including an educational general context, but also economic and social scopes, highlighting the precarious and unstable labour market reality.

Key words: adult education; professional training; educational systems.

Introduction

The educational system in Portugal plays an important role in the qualification and social inclusion of adults. The objectives stated in Lisbon Strategy reinforce this vital relation between education and integration of the citizens, assuming that better qualification supports enhanced employability, stronger competitiveness and increased economic growth. Considering this unquestionable association, lifelong learning actions and programmes concerning the access to second education opportunities are major instruments to promote, reinforcing contexts of learning and guarantying the improvement of adult qualifications.

However, the effectiveness of the different practices in the Portuguese educational context addressed to the active population, over 18 years old, can be analysed through both the predicted and currently known consequences.

Educational system in Portugal

The educational system in Portugal is, since 1985, structured in five levels of training according to the International Standard Classification of Education: pre-primary, basic, secondary, post-secondary non-tertiary, and tertiary education.

Referring the levels focused on adult education, the post-secondary non-tertiary level offers Specialized Technology Courses that leads to a diploma of specialized technology and a Level 4 vocational certificate. On the other hand, the tertiary level, gives the equivalence to the Level 5 according to the Training Levels Table

(Decision n.º 85/368/CEE, of the Council, of 16 of July, published in the Official Newspaper of the European Communities, n.º L 199, of 31 of July of 1985).

Furthermore, there are main forms of continuing vocational education and training for adults of working age (employed, unemployed and groups at risk of exclusion), including adult education and training courses that are intended to raise academic ability and vocational qualifications and enhance employability and certification of acquired learning (aimed at adults over the age of 18 who have no qualification or whose qualifications are inadequate for integration in labour market); the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Skills process is the most common platform for access to these courses.

In addition to the precedent forms of training, there are also courses addressed specifically at target-groups that face problems in joining the labour market (most of these courses are promoted by the Institute for Employment and Vocational Training).

On the other hand, in a legal framework, there are also continuing vocational education and training at the initiative of enterprises or social partners in accordance to the Labour Code that enshrines in law the employers' obligation to ensure that every year, at least 10% of workers on permanent contract take part in training courses and to assert the right of every work to receive a minimum of 35 hours certified training each year.

All of these actions are supported, in an infrastructural way, by a group of public, technological and professional schools; universities and other tertiary institutions; training centres of direct management and training professional centres of participated management (both related to the Institute for Employment and Vocational Training); non public operators. The involvement of the different entities is justified by major policy lines and curricular, teaching and financial guidelines based in an investment policy in the qualification of the Portuguese population, namely since Portugal began to benefit from structural funds aimed at supporting the adjustment path to the development average standards in the European Union. Today this politic continues, actually to achieve the targets established in the revised Lisbon Strategy.

The effectiveness of the adults' education in the Portuguese context

Over the last decades, Portugal has made a significant effort to qualify the general population, and the adults in particular, so as to make up the lag separating us from other developed countries. However, the current reality is still far from the situation of many European Union and OECD countries as Portugal continues to have low qualification levels.

According to the National Institute of Statistics, 44% of the young adults' population in 2001, with ages between 18 and 24 years old and with the required educational level (secondary), were participating in educational or training activities, however, this value presents, in 2007, a fall of 7.7 p.p.. Nevertheless the adults' population, understanding ages between 25 and 64 years old, presents a light increase in the participation in the same initiatives; however with very lower values comparing with the young adults (3.3% in 2001 with an increase of 1 p.p. in 2007).

The mentioned analysis makes us questioning the efficacy of the system of education and training in promoting, among adults, the necessary skills and competences for their integration in the labour market, by seeking a higher correspondence between what is teach/train to the Portuguese adult population and what is expected by the economics systems. Attending to the current context of world economic crisis, this matter becomes more important, since the unemployment is raising and the reintegration of these adults in the labour market becomes a bigger challenge.

In this sense, several perspectives related to the educational, economic and social systems emerged.

At the **educational system**, the speech is kept in a positive approach by the government which encourages private participation based in an investment with origin in grants of programs funded by the National Strategic Reference Framework (QREN) 2007-2013 through the Thematic Operational Programme for Human Potential (POPH). In this sense, the Portuguese government has created, in 2000, the National System for Recognizing, Validating and Certifying Competences (RVCC) carried out in the National Network of Centres for Recognizing Validating and Certifying Competences (now named New Opportunities Centres) hosted in public or private local bodies. The National Qualification Agency (ANQ), a public institute under the joint superintendence of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, states that "*the recognition of competences lifelong and life wide*

acquired is not only an important mechanism to reinforce individual self-esteem and social justice, but also a vital resource to promote adults' integration in new processes of formal learning". In 2008, there were 457 New Opportunities Centres that gathered the necessary requirements for certifying levels I, II and III of professional qualification. Furthermore, in the scope of adult education, the priority has been given to continuous education which aims, specifically, the integration of target-groups with low qualification and unprivileged conditions in the labour market, by promoting employability competences.

At the **economic system**, it is highlighted the modest relevance given by companies to continuous professional training for the development and maintenance of their workers competences. Besides the diverse organizational strategies, which may promote daily learning, professional training has, according to Artiles and Lope (1999), an ideological position in the context of a precarious labour market. These authors claim that *"in practice the promotion or stability in the job seems to depend on two aspects, the contextual and the personal"*. Thus, also the involvement of the worker in the company promotes the stability in the labour market. Training, when funded by a grant, can be seen as a source of motivation.

In fact, more than boost the employability and/or contribute for a competitive advantage, according to Almeida (2007), there are some restrictions *"resulting of the different levels of investment in the training, of the discrimination mechanisms existing in the access to the training and of the options as regards the modalities of privileged training"*. The same author stresses that the investment in training, made considering a specific national context and the company in which the employee is, faces *"material and symbolic barriers"*.

Finally, the **social system** puts in to question the consequences of the Portuguese educational system in the context of the adult's education, namely in what concerns the way things are being done.

It can be claimed that the present qualification reality it is also a discriminatory reality, since the main objectives of the adult education context relays on the integration of the disadvantage groups. This situation has been already notice by Luís Imaginário (2001) in his work focusing the use of a Balance of Competences in training contexts.

Nowadays, the development of policies related to lifelong learning aims the equal opportunities in the access to the labour market by reaching specific groups, such the ones with low qualifications, unemployed or at risk of losing their jobs. However, focusing in particular groups, according to Alves (2007), gives them "*a statute of second opportunity in the interior of the educational system, which is also perpetuated in the labour market*", since it can result in fewer career evolution opportunities (comparatively to human resources with higher education), greater probability of unemployment and, smaller recognition of his certification. The same author refers the "*socially selective character*" of the present training offer for adults which will be able to create alternative paths characterized by the flexibility in managing the school journey, since there is now a second opportunity.

Conclusions

The effectiveness of adult education context in Portugal has been described through several opinions of different authors mentioned in this article. The main concerns related to adult education context are related with the purpose of the adult educational system which aims the integration of disadvantaged social groups (including those who have the mark of second opportunity), by one hand, and with the existent obstacles to education/training (e.g. financing), by the other hand. One of the possible solutions can be the definition of specific programs and actions addressed specially to these target-groups in order to approach personal and labour market needs.

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