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The Role of Education in the World of Work: Fostering Learning Organisations

Maria C.V. Silva and Ana C.M. Garcia*

*NOVA School of Social Sciences and Humanities
Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences – NOVA University
Avenida de Berna, 26-C / 1069-061, Lisbon, Portugal*

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In this period of transition from a knowledge society to a learning society, the concept of learning becomes more comprehensive, extrapolating beyond the restricted field of education. Consequently, the development of competences combines and attributes the same value to formal, non-formal and informal learning. Lifelong learning is a necessity, aiming at the full development of the individual's learning potential.

The validation of prior learning is, therefore, fundamental for a greater visibility and valuation of this human capital. In fact, individuals will need to be re-qualified throughout their working lives and, given that the adult education offer represents a niche that does not seem to understand the requalification and continuous improvement of the workforce, the VPL – Validation of Prior Learning – approach could be an important pillar of lifelong learning strategies.

The authors focus on the following problem: To what extent can a VPL approach, supported by principles of educational sciences, help to improve the quality of Portuguese SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises)? We present the structural data obtained through the analysis of official documentary sources on on-the-job training and through exploratory interviews with key informants.

We found that the training processes presented value learning in the workplace. However, the definition of a training assessment methodology focused on the development of individual competencies, as well as the combination of non-formal and informal learning moments, seem to be lacking. As a result, the integration of the VPL approach may prove to be advantageous.

Keywords: Non-formal learning, informal learning, VPL approach, on-the-job training, SMEs.

Research area: pedagogy.

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* Corresponding author E-mail address: mcvs@fesh.unl.pt; ana_catarina_garcia@hotmail.com

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1. Introduction

The profile of the worker, as we perceive it today, is apparently meant for change, with companies needing a more versatile and agile employee (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Popova & Shynkarenko, 2016). Thus, the notion of competence has expanded from a simple technical and cognitive conceptualisation to include interpersonal and social elements (Balcar, 2016; Hurrell, 2016). Consequently, the success of the worker will depend not only on his hard skills, incorporated in the qualifications he has acquired, but also, and above all, on his soft skills that involve the development of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that should facilitate performance in specific social contexts (Balcar, 2016; Hurrell, 2016). Overcoming communication barriers, work planning, cooperation, problem solving or the very relationship that is built with the client are just a few examples of what soft skills are (Balcar, 2016; Hurrell, 2016).

Employers tend to confuse soft skills with personal attributes, that is, psychological traits, preferences, and motivations of the individual. Although these general predispositions can aid in the development of soft skills, they are not an essential or indispensable condition (Balcar, 2016; Hurrell, 2016; Laker & Powell, 2011). In fact, we can distinguish between communicability (a predisposition) and the ability to communicate effectively in the work environment (a soft skill). An individual can become an excellent communicator, skilled in the transmission of complex information, by acquiring knowledge about suitable methods and tools and their subsequent application (Balcar, 2016).

Flexibility seems to stand out as a key word in the professional field. The creation of multifunctional teams whose professionals, in addition to having knowledge in several interrelated areas, demonstrate openness to communicate creatively, becomes a central element for the survival of the company itself (Popova & Shynkarenko, 2016). Moreover, the connection with external markets, facilitated by the technological conditions that transpose physical and virtual borders, requires the development of intercultural competences. Therefore, professionals should not only improve their ability to communicate in different languages, both with partners and with clients, but also to develop a tolerant attitude towards other cultures (Popova & Shynkarenko, 2016).

Considering this context, it is possible to assert that in the last two decades, our world has entered a new phase of globalisation that raises new challenges for companies and, consequently, for their employees (Balcar, 2016; Hurrell, 2016; Laker & Powell, 2011). If companies are to be integrated and grow in global markets, they need workers

who have solid cognitive skills (including literacy and numeracy competencies) as well as communicative, management and availability for learning skills (Organisation for Economic..., 2017).

Hence, it is crucial to build a training model that can combine the systematic and simultaneous development of hard skills and soft skills in a business context. We intend to opt for a bottom-up approach that allows starting from the previous knowledge of the workers, acquired through non-formal and informal paths, enabling their active participation in a flexible and customized training process that values and brings out the skills already developed and facilitates the development of others (Duvekot, 2014a; Duvekot, 2014b; Duvekot, Halba et al., 2014; Enggaard & Aagaard, 2014; Kang, Duvekot & Murray, 2014; Olesen, 2014). For the construction of this training model we will rely on the VPL approach that reinforces the need for flexible, continuous and more adaptive learning if the citizen is to remain viable in the labour market. In fact, companies themselves should understand that investing in their employees amounts to investing in their own goals: “This awareness should culminate in setting specific targets for the investment in individuals and the support the organisations can give to this human resource development” (Duvekot, 2014a: 31).

In short, we intend to understand to what extent a training model, based on the VPL approach and supported by principles of educational sciences, could contribute to an improvement in the quality of Portuguese SMEs. Therefore, we have chosen to divide this article into three parts. The first part encompasses the theoretical framework, focusing on the most relevant concepts for our research: lifelong learning; recognition and validation of previous learning; VPL approach; on-the-job training. The second part focus on the theoretical foundations inherent to the choice of the methodology of investigation and instrumentation, to the description of investigation procedures and to the discussion and analysis of the collected data. The third part refers to the conclusions obtained from this first study which will enable the definition of a dynamic intervention strategy that will constitute a second study.

2. Lifelong learning

2.1. Introduction

The concept of learning society originated in the period of economic growth of the 1960s and 1970s when there was a substantial improvement in living conditions due to the rapid absorption of individuals by the labour market. This has triggered a growing

need for skilled workers, which in turn has led national government policies to focus more attention on the role of education in broadening and maintaining the growth of social and economic wealth. Education was then equated with lifelong learning and its importance and value was understood. Individuals were, therefore, encouraged to invest in their potential throughout life (Duvekot, 2014a; Duvekot, 2014b).

The rapid technological development of the 1990s, which provided access to multiple sources of information, seems to have also contributed to revolutionise the role of knowledge. In addition to its undeniable economic value, it has also become crucial for social development and cohesion and for the promotion of active citizenship. The Maastricht Treaty (1992) became an important turning point in educational policies, allowing the European Union to play an active role as a supranational body (Duvekot, 2014a). The Education & Training 2010 program outlined three strategic objectives (Nóvoa, 2013):

- 1) to improve the quality of education;
- 2) to facilitate universal access to education;
- 3) to promote the opening of the education system to the world.

As the year 2010 approached, and knowing that the results of its initiatives had fallen short of the defined objectives, the European Commission launched the Europe 2020 Strategy (2010), which focused on building a sustainable and inclusive economy capable of high levels of employability, productivity and social cohesion. 2010 is highlighted as a year of resumption, stressing the need for a coherent and determined political response that shows evidence of boldness and ambition and that can generate smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in order to create new jobs and to give a clear direction to our societies (European Commission, 2010).

We are thus faced with a scenario that seems to favour the transition from a knowledge society to a learning society. Therefore, we deem it important to highlight a set of common principles on which it is based (Duvekot, 2014a; Duvekot, 2014b):

- 1) learning comprehends much more than simply education;
- 2) lifelong learning becomes a necessity, since an initial qualification is no longer a structural guarantee for a career;
- 3) the development of skills is not restricted to formal learning, but also encompasses informal and non-formal learning, all of which should be considered as learning of equal value;
- 4) society must be viewed as a social and economic structure in which all individuals assume themselves as lifelong learners.

2.2. The different types of learning

When we approach the concept of lifelong learning, we must look at the different contexts in which it may occur. It is therefore important to clearly define the concepts of formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning. Formal learning is intentional, both on the part of the learners and on the part of the person responsible for the learning process. Consequently, it is properly structured as regards its objectives and duration and is conducive to a final certification. On the other hand, non-formal learning assumes a broader classification, in the sense that we may be faced with a form of learning that presupposes unintentional sources of learning or accredited learning programs that include some form of final certification, such as those obtained through driving schools. Informal learning includes all unconscious influences provided by family, groups and society in general, as well as by the accidents that occur in the course of our lives. However, it is wrong to understand informal learning as a single process, since it entails different types of learning. Thus, self-directed informal learning implies that we intentionally adopt the identity of learners, planning and controlling learning activities, and measuring our success in terms of how much we learn. Any adult can adopt a self-taught posture, engaging in a learning project in a deliberate way. Incidental informal learning involves our involvement in an important activity. Although vaguely aware that we are learning, our focus lies in the task. We do not perceive ourselves as learners, but as “workers,” and as such we also do not conceive of what we are doing as learning, but as the attempt to carry out a task. Our success depends on how successful we are in the accomplishment of the task. Nonetheless, during this process, we have learned a lot. Unintentional informal learning is almost always unconscious and unplanned (Duvekot, 2014a, Rogers, 2014).

The definitions attributed to each type of learning should not, however, guide us in considering each of the concepts as dichotomous. Rogers (2014) suggests that we analyse them as a continuum (Fig. 1).

The boundaries between the different types of learning tend to dilute and necessarily undergo changes depending on the context and the discursive community. In addition, we must also consider the hybridity of learning varieties, since formal and informal learning elements can coexist at the same time. No one is a “non-learner”, so when individuals are inserted into formal and non-formal programs, they carry their own tacit knowledge, as well as their sets of skills, frames of reference and social imaginaries. Hence, they are involved in a process of continuous learning, of which they may be more or less aware.

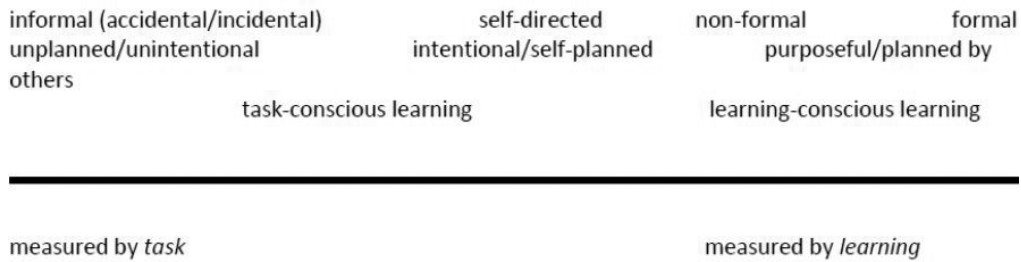


Fig. 1. The different types of leaning as a continuum (Rogers, 2014: 10)

2.3. Human resources and skills

Skills needs are changing. The development of academic skills is fundamental, but insufficient. The promotion of social skills, communication and higher order thinking (problem solving, critical thinking and decision making) is becoming increasingly vital for citizenship and employability in the 21st century (OECD, 2017).

Aligning business practices, public policies, and education and training systems with the necessary skills today is essential. By investing in the skills of their populations, countries can help ensure that their participation in global markets translates into better economic and social outcomes. The combination of “hard skills” and “soft skills” is even more pressing when confronted with the number of adults who do not have the necessary skills to face the challenges of globalization. It is crucial that you invest in skills that not only help individuals enter the labour market and protect them from the risk of job losses, but also promote international competitiveness and economic progress in an interconnected world (Balcar, 2016; Hurrell, 2016; OECD, 2017).

Building a culture of lifelong learning in the workplace means moving from “education for employment” to “education for employability” as well as from “job security” to “professional development”. A key strategy could be to integrate competency-based recruitment to supplement (or replace) conventional models based on teaching degrees. Competency recognition systems could thus be organized by governments and industries at national or potentially global level. This type of organisation would create permanent feedback between labour markets and education systems, allowing for a continuous and gradual adaptation as opposed to the need for large-scale singular reforms (World Economic Forum, 2017).

2.4. The VPL approach

In this learning society, VPL assumes itself as an important pillar of lifelong learning strategies, as it operates them through bottom-up learning processes. It allows for a

greater openness to the learner's individual perspectives, making their empowerment more evident. The concept of empowerment refers to freedom of choice and action to structure one's life, implying control over resources and decisions, and focusing on individuals' capacities to participate, negotiate, influence, and hold accountable institutions that influence their lives. Consequently, this empowerment transforms the nature of learning and challenges the learning system itself to develop strategies in different settings and for different purposes. If learning affects individuals' private and public life, it is vital that they have access to all forms and stages of learning in order to shape their own destiny. It is in this sense that VPL can be understood as a bridge of learning opportunities for all (Duvekot, 2014a; Duvekot, 2014b).

Assuming itself as the central instrument in fulfilling the entire VPL process, the portfolio is directly related to three distinct ways of developing the VPL approach (Fig. 2).

1) through the construction of a portfolio, the individual can compile an inventory of his competencies, according to a predefined set of standards, with the intention of its evaluation and subsequent recognition (**summative VPL**);

2) the portfolio can serve as a starting point for deciding on the need to continue learning, in order to develop, for example, a specific competence that is useful for the individual's work experience (**formative VPL**);

3) the **reflective VPL** presupposes empowering individuals to manage their own careers, articulating their developmental needs and building their own competencies. The building of the portfolio should focus on the entire learning biography of the individual, outlining a plan of action (Duvekot, 2014a; Duvekot, 2014b).

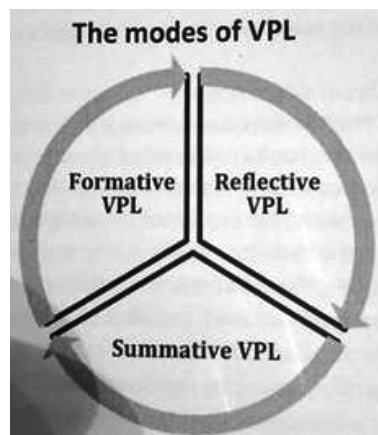


Fig. 2. The three forms of development of the VPL approach (Duvekot, 2014a: 29)

The portfolio is an essential prerequisite when implementing the VPL process. It may take the form of a showcase, making evident the professional products and behavioural results that will serve as proof to the summative process – **dossier portfolio** – or it may assume a more reflexive nature, but in which the list of relevant evidence is maintained for the achievement of the formative and/or summative processes – **development portfolio**. We are particularly interested though in the **personal portfolio** given its highly reflective, personalized and holistic character. The individual begins by completing the portfolio with the description of his activities and accomplishments, and then reflects on them by analysing the personal competencies that he believes to have developed. It is only after a clear understanding of his qualities and defects and how he can further develop his personal competencies that a personal action plan will be drawn up, along with the specific objective(s) of development (Duvekot, 2014a; Duvekot, 2014b).

The VPL process consists of **five** stages:

1. Commitment and awareness of the value of competencies – it is important that the individual is aware of his competencies, as well as the value they have for himself and for others in certain moments and situations;

2. Recognition of personal competencies – identify and list skills by building a portfolio, complementing reflection with work experience, diplomas, employers' declarations, professional products, references or other documents that demonstrate the existence of a certain competence. The proof may be directed to the profession or position for which the VPL process is being developed. This stage is composed of a preparatory step and a retrospective step. The former is designed to articulate a real need for skills in the different functional profiles of the organisation and the latter entails filling individual portfolios as well as gathering evidence of the learning processes in a recent past;

3. Valuation or evaluation of competencies – this stage focuses on the evaluation of the contents of the portfolio, and the competencies shown will be compared with a defined standard for this purpose. This will only be used to gauge the qualifications of the participant and will result either in organisational or national validation in the form of certificates, diplomas or career advancements or a valuation in the form of a career advice. This phase involves three different steps: defining the standard of the specific VPL process which can be any standard that meets the needs of the individual and/or organisation; the valuation and consequent evaluation of the portfolio according to the previously defined standard; and the validation of the learning proof. After completing

these three initial stages, the retrospective part of the VPL process is done and its prospective power is about to begin;

4. Development plan – transformation of validation and/or advice into a personal action plan that will be based on learning activities that can be developed in formal or non-formal learning environments, in work situations, during a change of position, by offering coaching or by creating an environment in which informal learning is stimulated. This stage comprises the next **two** steps:

4.1. First, a **correspondence** must be made between the development plan of the individual and the objectives of the organisation, which can be achieved simply by indicating that any type of individual learning is also for the benefit of the organisation or making the personal development plan an integral part of the larger organisation plan;

4.2. Secondly, the beginning of the **customized learning/development** of the individual, which implies learning independently of form, time, place and environment.

5. Structural implementation of the VPL – transmutation of this implementation into a personal strategy for updating the portfolio or into the human resources management of an organisation. The results of a pilot VPL should therefore be evaluated to show how implementation can take place from a tailor-made basis. Thus, an organisation should be able to use the structural VPL to meet the specific objectives defined in the pilot VPL, adding new objectives if needed (Duvekot, 2014a; Duvekot, 2014b).

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

We have formulated the following problem: **To what extent can a VPL approach, supported by principles of the educational sciences, help to improve the quality of Portuguese SMEs?** To solve it, we have defined the following general objectives which will represent two distinct but complementary phases of our work:

- 1) To know how on-the-job training is carried out in Portuguese SMEs;
- 2) To understand the extent to which a training model, based on the VPL approach, provides a (re)qualification of workers that addresses the needs of companies;
- 3) To apply principles of educational sciences for quality training.

Regarding **general objective number 1**, we defined the following specific objectives:

1.1. To know the legislation on the access and frequency of on-the-job training sessions;

1.2. To know how the training and/or requalification of the employees is processed;

1.3. To understand how the quality of the training sessions is controlled and/or feedback is obtained from the trainees.

Concerning **general objective number 2**, we defined the following specific objectives:

2.1. To implement a training model in accordance with the proposals presented by key informants;

2.2. To evaluate the implemented model;

2.3. To draw conclusions;

2.4. To propose an on-the-job training model that is feasible and adapted to Portuguese SMEs.

With regard to **general objective number 3**, we defined the following specific objectives:

3.1. To mobilise knowledge, articulating theory and practice;

3.2. To promote self-directed learning that enables the learner to be involved throughout the training process;

3.3. To overcome internal and external barriers through the development of language and intercultural skills.

3.2. Participants

This project involves two distinct moments of analysis and data collection – **Study I** and **Study II** – that relate to the general and specific objectives already mentioned and which complement each other.

The participants in Study I were those responsible for training academies related to Portuguese SMEs.

Participants in Study II will depend on the analysis of the results obtained in Study I. However, SMEs may be selected using the following criteria:

1. Ensure the presence of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and some sectoral diversity.

2. Companies whose employees consider that they have competencies that they cannot develop or demonstrate and for which they do not have any qualifications.

3. Companies that recognize the potential value of training for the development of their activity in the market, but do not feel the beneficial effects of it.

4. Companies that begin to feel the need to fill gaps in different areas.

3.3. Instruments and procedures

Study I consisted of:

1. Conducting a survey and analysing official documentary sources (i.e., Portuguese legal documentation and European documentation) about on-the-job training;
2. Conducting exploratory interviews with key informants in order to obtain information that can be compared and subsequently applied.

Study I allowed us to collect structural data which made it possible to analyse, in an adequate and profound way, the official perspective on aspects of continuing on-the-job training (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994; Estrela, 1994).

After analysing the content of the data gathered in Study I and establishing the respective conclusions, we will proceed to the definition of a dynamic intervention strategy (Study II) directly related to the general objectives numbers 2 and 3. This could be substantiated by the realization from semi-structured focus group interviews to SME workers affected to a specific economic activity sector in order to contrast the official data analysed with the actual experience of the collaborators.

Based on the conclusions drawn from the content analysis of the semi-structured focus group interviews, we may opt for an action-research methodology that allows the implementation of a training model based on the VPL reflexive approach.

4. Data analysis and discussion

The structural data collected allowed us to list the following themes: practicality; competencies; training team; training methods; quality assessment; impact; territorial scope; types of learning and receptivity.

The “**practicality**” theme highlights the importance given to the transmission of knowledge that can meet the immediate needs of the trainees, providing them with the essential tools both for a career progression and for the correct application of legislative changes in areas relevant to the functioning of the company. In fact, the versatility and agility of individuals is a source of growth for the company itself (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Popova & Shynkarenko, 2016).

The “**competencies**” theme highlights the centrality and the potential differentiating effect of the development of competencies. Thus, the training sessions should combine, in a harmonious way, technical competences and behavioural skills,

allowing the definition of an action plan whose results prove to be advantageous, both for the individual and for the company that he/she represents.

The “**training team**” theme points out the preponderance of the qualification and experience of trainers who may be internal or external collaborators, depending on the training project and on the protocols previously established. Therefore, it seems to be important to ensure that trainers not only master content but also know and act in accordance with the guidelines of the various programs, in order to ensure the consistency of the training projects and action plans and consequent improvement of the companies.

The “**training methods**” theme is closely related to the previous theme, emphasizing the need to adapt the methodologies to different projects, as well as the preponderant role of the trainer in their choice. Attention should be drawn to the appropriateness of content and its examples to the specific market of companies – SMEs in particular – which demonstrates knowledge of European directives. The approach to practical, useful subjects that can benefit the company in the short term seems to be a focal point for the quality of training processes. Moreover, the operationalization of the training projects on the digitalization of the economy and the development of digital competencies also seems to be relevant in the construction of a sustainable industrial base, prone to internationalisation (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; EC, 2010, Popova & Shynkarenko, 2016).

The “**quality assessment**” theme highlights the common procedure for the evaluation of training sessions. As a rule, a global assessment is made through the distribution of a questionnaire to the trainees or a discussion of ideas at the end of the training project. Data are then treated and analysed. Although this methodology is still under construction, it seems to be an attempt to compare the before and after the training process. This may suggest a greater concern with the individual need for adult re-qualification throughout their working life, an essential factor in the construction of a learning culture in the workplace (Duvekot, 2014a; Duvekot, 2014b; OECD, 2017; WEF, 2017).

The “**impact**” theme is related to the previous one since it analyses the personal and professional results obtained by the attendance to training sessions. At the same time, it emphasizes the development of competencies – especially behavioural skills – that enable the growth and evolution of the individual and the company.

The “**territorial scope**” theme focuses on the importance given to the location (or locations) where the training is given. Indeed, attention to national coverage and geographical adaptation seems to give due consideration to the financial and

organisational barriers which often prevent workers from having access to training courses.

The “**types of learning**” theme addresses the process of exploring the worker’s previous knowledge, highlighting the value attributed to the recognition of the worker’s prior knowledge. However, the different training projects seem to be part of non-formal learning, and it is not clear to what extent informal learning is valued.

The “**receptivity**” theme allows us to analyse the degree of openness and welcome of the workers to different training projects. The need to mobilise the company and the employee through demonstrating the usefulness and applicability of the contents and competencies to be developed seems therefore unavoidable. Otherwise, the participation in the training sessions will be limited to the legal compliance of the thirty-five hours of training per year (Portuguese Employment..., 2016).

The several aspects raised in the previous analysis can be summarised into the following three topics: different skills; need to (re)train; knowledgeable training team.

Different skills – it seems interesting that the success of the worker depends on a balanced combination of hard skills and soft skills. When the company reaches a certain level of maturity, behavioural skills become particularly pressing. In addition, the development of these competencies is crucial for employees with coordination functions. Academic skills or hard skills are fundamental but insufficient (Balcar, 2016; Hurrell, 2016).

Need to (re)train – as we move from a knowledge-based society to a learning society, the need to retrain individuals throughout their working lives becomes a necessity (Duvekot, 2014a; Duvekot, 2014b; WEF, 2017; OECD, 2017). This fact seems to be duly taken into account when the individual is offered the possibility of integration into the company, depending on his results in the training course, but also considering the skills he has already developed.

Knowledgeable training team – care in ensuring that trainers and consultants know and act in accordance with the guidelines of the programs demonstrates the concern with the consistency of the training projects and plans of action and improvement of the companies (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; EC, 2010)

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The training and/or requalification processes analysed are positive examples in that they include not only the need to combine hard skills and soft skills, but also the importance of on-the-job learning and the consequent adaptability and versatility of

the collaborator. However, bearing in mind that training should consider key elements of the research in education and training, the following aspects seem to have been overlooked:

1) the **definition of a methodology for the evaluation and monitoring of training sessions** that focuses on the development of individual competencies and not only on the evolution of the company;

2) the **combination of moments of non-formal and informal learning**. These concepts seem to be interpreted in a somewhat reductive way, making it difficult to understand if the previous knowledge of the individuals is considered in the training projects.

Hence, we believe that the integration of the VPL approach into a training model that, in itself, shows positive elements may prove to be advantageous. Indeed, by allowing greater openness to individual perspectives and by emphasizing the reflective nature of learning, it may enable both the development of new skills and the strengthening of skills already developed in informal and non-formal environments, culminating in a more evident empowerment of the individual.

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Роль обучения в мире работы: развитие образовательных организаций

М.К.В. Сильва, А.К.М. Гарсиа

*Институт общественных и гуманитарных наук
Новый Университет Лиссабона*

*Междисциплинарный центр общественных наук
Португалия, 26-С / 1069-061, Лиссабон, Avenida de Berna*

В период перехода от общества знающих к обществу обучающихся концепция непрерывного обучения становится всеобъемлющей, выходя за пределы ограниченной области образования. Развитие компетенций придает одинаковую ценность как формальному и неформальному, так и информальному образованию. Обучение на протяжении всей жизни становится необходимостью, направленной на полноценную реализацию потенциала человека.

Следовательно, валидация предшествующего обучения выступает основополагающей для оценки человеческого капитала. Фактически люди должны будут проходить переобучение в течение всей их трудовой жизни. С учетом того что образование для взрослых сейчас представляет собой нишу, где, по всей видимости, не предполагается переквалификация и постоянное развитие компетентности кадров, точкой опоры для стратегий непрерывного обучения может стать VPL-подход (Validation of Prior Learning – валидация предшествующего обучения).

Авторы рассматривают следующую проблему: в какой степени указанный подход, поддерживаемый принципами педагогики, может помочь улучшить качество работы португальских малых и средних предприятий (МСП)? В статье приведены структурированные данные, полученные в результате анализа официальных документов по обучению на рабочем месте и предварительных интервью с ключевыми фигурами данной сферы.

Замечено, что особую ценность представляет обучение на рабочем месте. Тем не менее очевидна недостаточность методик оценивания обучения, ориентированного на развитие индивидуальных компетенций, а также на признание неформального и информального обучения. В результате интеграция VPL-подхода в образование для взрослых может оказаться крайне выгодной.

Ключевые слова: неформальное образование, информальное образование, VPL-подход, обучение на рабочем месте, МСП.

Научная специальность: 13.00.00 – педагогические науки.
