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The paradox of utilitarian recognition of prior learning: the cases of Portugal and Slovenia

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the vertical influence of the European Union (EU) policy on recognition of prior learning (RPL) in one Southern European country (Portugal) and in a Central European one (Slovenia). We stress the influence of the EU policy on adult education (AE) policies and the development of RPL granting professional qualification. Although not widely acknowledged in adult education theoretical discussions, we use the RPL models introduced by Judy Harris to debate the main aims of core official RPL national policy documents from 2000 to 2018 using documentary analysis. Comparative analysis of the two countries is made, and similarities and differences between the RPL provisions are debated. Our findings indicate the relevance of the utilitarian approach to RPL within national policies. Furthermore, these findings allow us to question why employers give little attention to adult learners' qualification acquired through RPL.

Keywords: Adult education, European Union, Portugal, recognition of prior learning, Slovenia

Introduction

Recently, RPL has become a relevant factor in AE policies in the EU countries and beyond. In this paper, we use the concept of RPL—i.e. the idea of recognising prior learning wherever and whenever it took place—although other concepts and conceptions are known under the acronyms of APEL (accreditation of prior experiential learning), PLAR (prior learning assessment and recognition), VPL (validation of prior learning) and RVC (recognition and validation of competences), which were developed in different



locations (see Andersson, Fejes, & Sandberg, 2013, p. 405). From a conceptual point of view, several authors have stressed the transformative dimension of RPL, which refers to the knowledge and skills developed throughout adult learners' lives through experiences (see, for example, Guimarães, 2012; Harris, 1999; Lodigiani & Sarli, 2017). However, in European, as well as national AE policies, the utilitarian dimension (stressing employability, mobility and competitiveness) has been emphasised. Within the EU guidelines for lifelong learning (LLL) and the establishment of the European and national qualifications frameworks (NQF), RPL is foreseen as a 'salvation narrative' (Andersson, 2008) for the individual and society, as it is part of social and economic policies and a way of workforce development (Mikulec, 2018).

The aim of this article is to analyse the vertical influence of the EU policy on RPL in one South European country (Portugal) and one Central European one (Slovenia) in the period from 2000 to 2018. It also explores the horizontal effects in two different European contexts based on a tension between reinforcing individual empowerment of adult learners (within aims of social justice and social change) and attracting and keeping workers in the labour market (following economic development and competitiveness). This article explores the following research questions: How are the EU RPL policies situated between the goals of social justice and individual transformation on one side and employability and competitiveness on the other? How are the EU RPL policies interpreted and translated in two different national contexts, the Portuguese and the Slovenian one?

In what follows, we first briefly introduce the analytical models of RPL by Harris (1999) and the EU RPL policies, outline our methodological approach and then analyse Portuguese and Slovene RPL policies in line with the main aim of the article. In the final section, we discuss the identified similarities and differences. We argue that both countries' policies emphasise the utilitarian approach of RPL and, lastly, conclude that there seems to emerge a paradox within national policies on RPL—namely, why have employers given little attention to adult learners' qualification acquired through RPL and how this relates to AE policy.

Analytical models of policy discourses on RPL

Several authors have stressed the shift from education to learning, which has occurred in public policies over the last decades (Milana, 2012, among others). This shift has involved a dominant use of the LLL expression in discourses as well as an emphasis on individual learners and on the rational thinking adults use when building their knowledge in order to develop an education framework that has utility for professional spheres. Within this frame, it is not only knowledge that adults can obtain in traditional education and training systems that is at stake but also knowledge that is developed in different contexts, especially non-formal and informal ones. According to Andersson, Fejes and Ahn (2004, p. 58), 'The important thing is to identify what you know, rather than what courses you have studied, and learning from experience might not give exactly the same learning as learning from studying'. In fact, different forms of knowledge acquired from experience have become more visible. Therefore, public forms of provision have included ways of recognising and validating such non-formal and informal knowledge, following RPL guidelines from transnational organisations like the EU (Council of the European Union [CEU], 2012).

RPL as a form of provision can be traced back to the United States (US) and to the end of the Second World War, when the learning developed by soldiers was recognised as important for entering the labour market. Later, in the early 1970s, RPL was further

developed to broaden access to specific jobs according to the French experience in validation. Recent Slovenian AE policies follow similar aims. Additionally, RPL has also been used to assess knowledge gained through informal and non-formal education—what has been learnt at work and at home in different contexts and countries—which facilitates the validation of vocational competences when adults are immigrants (Andersson & Fejes, 2005; Lodigiani & Sarli, 2017). RPL provisions also aim at widening access to higher education, especially in English-speaking countries (such as the US and UK). Other RPL provisions allow the certification basic and upper-secondary education, such as in Portugal, which values knowledge developed throughout life in both formal and informal contexts (Barros, 2013; Guimarães, 2012).

Many RPL provisions aim at giving value to the knowledge and vocational competences adults possess, in particular those relevant for professional contexts. It has been a way for adults to transfer the learning and knowledge they have. The qualifications acquired from this recognition gives a formal character to (non-formal and informal) learning and can facilitate a change of jobs or the move from one work context to another (Andersson, Fejes & Ahn, 2004). RPL provisions have been used as social justice tools, which have been seen as a way of rewarding adults with a formal certificate recognising their knowledge and competences. This makes higher education more available for people who did not attend university (Guimarães, 2012). Finally, RPL provisions have been used to empower people: it can raise individuals' self-esteem and can also make people aware of the need to change society. This is more relevant when adults have no expectations to enter the educational system, and RPL provides this possibility as well as the chance to value a different kind of knowledge acquired throughout life and to influence the development of society (Andersson, Fejes & Ahn, 2004; Harris, 1999).

Considering the RPL experiences as well as the AE policies found in several countries, Harris (1999) proposes 'ways of seeing RPL', and other authors have specified aims that the RPL provisions may include (Andersson, Fejes & Ahn, 2004; Fejes & Andersson, 2009).

RPL models: The state of RPL practices and its theoretical underpinnings

Harris (1999) presents four models that include different perspectives focusing on how prior learning performs in social functions. According to Harris, it is possible to identify a *utilitarian approach to RPL* (Harris, 1999) in activities involving further education and vocational training for adults to achieve qualifications, according to specific standards and frameworks. Based on human capital principles as well as functional and technical reasoning, this utilitarian perspective is 'underpinned by a market-led philosophy in which education is consumer-oriented and utilitarian mainly in terms of its usefulness to the labour market' (p. 3). No critical thinking is involved. Similarly, Fejes and Andersson (2009) identify the aims directed at economic development, which make use of adults' knowledge and competences more effectively in the labour market. Within this approach, knowledge is measured based on its usefulness: 'Its extrinsic use-value is brought to the fore; its social value pushed to the rear' (Harris, 1999, p. 127).

Another approach is *learning and development RPL* (Harris, 1999), which is based on humanist and progressive discourses stressing individual advancement and the democratisation of education in terms of access to higher education. Within this approach, valuing learning from experience is central as well as turning it into academic disciplinary knowledge according to dominant academic discourses. Therefore, RPL is considered 'a translation device, a one-way bridge-building process between different cultures of knowledge' (Harris, 1999, p. 131) and a way of developing new capacities that may be

equivalent to explicit or implicit academic standards. Similarly, Fejes and Andersson (2009) refer to social justice aims in relation to individual opportunities that can broader access to different levels of education.

A third approach to RPL is related to a *radical and critical tradition of RPL within AE* based on emancipatory discourses linked to critical, feminist and post-colonial theories. Learning from experience is considered a collective rather than an individualised process as well as a way of acquiring knowledge in order to change the world (Harris, 1999). Therefore, ‘experience is seen as a social product and as a foundation for the development of authentic and oppositional forms of knowledge’ (Harris, 1999, p. 133). According to Fejes and Andersson (2009), these RPL aims are directed at social change in an attempt to enhance adults’ knowledge change society.

Harris (1999) also refers to a fourth model, which is the *Trojan-horse* way of seeing RPL, concerned with change and characterised by curriculum flexibility, emphasising application and practice-based learning programmes to recognise the non-formal and experiential learning to be found in higher education especially. With this model, there is a stronger valorisation of prior learning, avoiding the stress of matching between developed knowledge and existing standards, the curricula or cognitive capacities demanded by many higher education institutions.

In recent research, other theoretical trends can open important possibilities for (re)conceptualisation of RPL research and practices. Some of these studies draw on theories related to constructivism, postmodernism, recognition, socio-materialism and social realism (cf. Andersson, Fejes & Sandberg, 2013; Andersson & Harris, 2006; Harris, Wihak, & Kleef, 2014). In spite of the relevance of such theoretical approaches, this article’s discussion relies on the models or ‘ways of seeing RPL’ proposed by Harris (1999). These models were developed after RPL practices in South Africa, including each model dimensions translated in keywords to policy discourses on this form of provision. Several theoretical contributions, from social critical theory, socio-cultural theory and the constructivist theory allowed several analytical models that serve us as a framework for the debate of existing RPL policy discourses in both countries.

EU policies on RPL

At the EU level, AE policies, to which RPL is closely connected, have been developed relatively late. The adoption of the *Lisbon Strategy* in the 2000 may be understood as the starting point in establishing an European education policy defined by common goals, implementation tools and financial resources, although EU formal competences in the field of education are limited due to the subsidiarity rule (Mikulec, 2018). Furthermore, with the adoption of the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, LLL became the Commission’s main policy concept and instrument for achieving a knowledge-based economy and society, in which employability and economic growth gained central attention (Andersson, Fejes & Sandberg, 2013). To support the goal of achieving the knowledge-based society, the EU adopted several guidelines on RPL—or ‘validation of non-formal and informal learning’ as officially conceptualised in the EU policies—in coming years. In 2004, the Council adopted the *Common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning* (CEU, 2004). The same year, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Education and Training (CEDEFOP) prepared the first update on the *European inventory on validation*—followed by updates in 2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014, 2016 and 2018 (CEDEFOP, 2020) and published the *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*

(CEDEFOP, 2009, 2015). In 2011, the Council adopted a renewed *European agenda for adult learning* (CEU, 2011), which endeavoured to ‘encourage the development of effective lifelong guidance systems, as well as integrated systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning’ (p. 3). A year later, the Council adopted special *Recommendations on the validation of non-formal and informal learning* (CEU, 2012), which stipulated that member states should establish appropriate arrangements for RPL no later than 2018.

These recommendations set clear procedures to be followed in RPL—identification, documentation, assessment and certification—and such principles as the following: arrangements linked to NQF; guidance and counselling; ‘skills audit’ for the unemployed; quality assurance measures; (partial) qualifications gained through RPL based on the same standards as qualifications in formal education; and European transparency tools used for the documentation of learning outcomes (cf. Cavaco, Lafont & Pariat, 2014). Furthermore, the main motivation for developing RPL systems in member states is better ‘employability and mobility’, increased ‘motivation for lifelong learning’ and enhanced ‘competitiveness and economic growth’ (CEU, 2012, p. 1). For these reasons, several scholars have emphasised that the EU RPL policies focus on economic development (towards the labour market) on utilitarian goals (Andersson, Fejes & Sandberg, 2013), as well as towards the ‘credential/credit-exchange’ model (Cameron, 2012) - that is, RPL is used for credit or qualifications.

Methodology

For the comparative empirical analysis of RPL, we have chosen Portugal and Slovenia, both of which are EU member states. These are semiperipheral countries (Sousa Santos, 1993) in the EU, which have different histories, welfare regimes and AE systems (Desjardins, 2017). Furthermore, they are both subject to EU political and economic pressures—for example, imposed structural adjustment and austerity measures after the 2008 economic crisis, which severely affected public funding and led to the privatisation of higher education and AE (Antunes, 2016; Mikulec & Jelenc Krašovec, 2016). Moreover, in the fields of AE and LLL, both countries depend on the funding provided by the European Social Fund (ESF), as national funds declined or never were that relevant, such as in Portugal. Therefore, in line with our research questions, we would like to stress the vertical relationships between the EU RPL policies and the RPL policies of two selected member states. We also would like to emphasise the horizontal relationships between the EU RPL policies and national policies by selecting specific data for analysis that stress the similarities between countries. Additionally, specific countries may be able to influence transnational guidelines. Even if this bottom-up trend is more difficult to observe due to the role of international organisations in the diffusion of LLL (Jakobi, 2012), it is important to stress that the Portuguese RPL is a relevant case concerning the access to this form of provision (Werquin, 2014) and can be used in international settings to provide a model of provision, that could be transferable to other countries.

As regards the selection of sources, we chose core official national AE policy documents (National Assembly, 2004, 2013), official policy documents and RPL reports (ANQEP, 2018; SIAE, 2011), regulations (Portaria n.º 232/2016, 29.08; Uradni list RS, 2009, 2015), policy documents from international organisations and reports (Eurostat, 2019a, 2019b; OECD, 2018a, 2018b), official data from websites on education and qualifications (INE, 2019; NRP, 2019) as well as scientific journal articles on RPL in

Portugal and Slovenia in order to improve the reliability and objectivity of the comparisons made. Moreover, as natives of Portugal and Slovenia, we could interpret the sources available in the national languages, and we are knowledgeable about the political context and AE in the two countries (cf. Milana & Rasmussen, 2018).

In the comparative analysis, we juxtaposed two national cases in line with Egetenmeyer's (2012, p. 80) proposal. First, we did 'descriptive juxtaposition', which involved data collection on RPL and background country information, followed by 'analytical juxtaposition', which included searching for common RPL features in both countries. Second, we did 'descriptive comparison', through which we identified main similarities and differences between countries, followed by 'analytical comparison', which served as a way to interpret similarities and differences. We also used the method of documentary analysis—a content analytical approach used to analyse policy documents (Field & Schemmann, 2017).

AE and RPL policies in Portugal and Slovenia

AE and RPL policies in Portugal

Portugal is a Southern European country with a population of 10.3 million. It became a member of the European Community (EU) in 1986. It is considered a developed country having economic patterns found in other EU countries: services represent more than 70% of its economy, whereas industry, construction, energy and water production correspond to 23%. In 2017, the GDP per capita was 76.7% of the EU average. The unemployment rate has fallen in recent years, dropping to 7% in 2018. Since Portugal was severely hit by the 2008 economic crisis, its GDP is still lower than the pre-crisis level (European Commission [EC], 2019a).

In Portugal, the (new) AE policy was adopted after 1999 (Alves et al., 2016; Barros, 2013) and was strongly influenced by EU LLL guidelines and European Social Fund (ESF) funding. Several discontinuities in national strategies have followed, including the adoption and failure of certain programmes, the establishment and re-establishment of national agencies and local learning centres. Despite policies intermittences, two new forms of certified provision, such as RPL and AE training courses, have been under development since 2000. These are directed at widening access to education and training and at raising school education attainment directed at promoting the reconversion of the workmanship within globalisation; and these initiatives will help tackle the low educational levels of the Portuguese population. In 2017, only 33.5% of adults had completed upper secondary and tertiary education, and the participation rate in LLL was 10.3% (Eurostat, 2019a, 2019b). In the last two decades, these provisions have been the object of increasing formalisation procedures, including laws, regulations, guidelines, standards of competences and online system of monitoring of work achieved in local AE centres.

Despite a dramatic increase in funding from 2007 to 2011 from mainly the EU structural funds (85%) and more participants in LLL during this period (up to 11.5% in 2011, according to Eurostat, 2019a), a change in government and strong funding cuts from 2012 to 2016 (when the programme Qualifica started) resulted in the abandonment of the AE policy. Such cuts also caused lower levels of participation in LLL and around half of the population aged between 15 and 64 holding less than upper secondary education. Also, the generational gap between the younger generations (holding higher education qualifications) and the older ones (holding lower qualifications or even being

illiterate) became clearer. Additionally, the mismatch referring to existing low professional skills of the population and needs of highly qualified workers in specific economic sectors was highlighted during the period under discussion (Canário, Vieira & Capucha, 2019).

In Portugal, RPL is based on a comprehensive set of procedures—namely, standards of key competences that are also the ones used in AE and training courses—which facilitates the forms of provision that are based on the same aims and procedures favouring the establishment of a system (Barros, 2013). Up to 2011, RPL only allowed adults to get a formal school certification. However, after 2011, policymakers promoted a strong link between education and training and established different routes to get a professional qualification combined with a school certification or just a professional qualification. Therefore, RPL kept the aim of increasing school education levels among the Portuguese population and increasing the number of adult learners who have completed upper secondary education and decide to access higher education. Furthermore, RPL has emphasised the utilitarian approach (Harris, 1999), directed specifically at those adults older than 23 years and having at least three years of professional experience (ANQEP, 2018).

The possibility of getting a professional qualification through RPL was established through several steps, including the support of representatives from the labour market sectors with the work of whom the qualifications were set. The first one was the creation of a National Qualification System (NQS), which was directed at strengthening the link between general education and professional training in all vocational education and training (VET) pathways and designing arrangements for VET qualifications to better match labour market needs. Within the NQS, the National Council for Vocational Training was created as well as the Sector Councils for Qualification, which were in charge of establishing qualifications required for each job. Additionally, the National Catalogue of Qualifications, the NQF and the Individual Skills Handbook were also created. In 2018, 156 standards for professional RPL could be found, 76 for the NQF level two and 80 for the NQF level four. Being equivalent to the training standards used in formal VET, the learning outcomes have been set as the main aims (ANQEP, 2018).

Different from the RPL allowing school certification, the one directed at professional qualification has involved fewer adults being certified. Data from 2017 show that from the 9.290 adults certified by RPL in terms of education, only 3.188 were certified in terms of professional qualifications (1.920 for NQF level two and 1.268 for NQF level four). From those adults who received full professional qualification at level two, most were certified as geriatric social workers (51%) and electricians (12%), whereas those with professional qualifications at level four were mostly certified as technicians in the educational area (26%), technician in construction (11%) and family support workers (11%) (ANQEP, 2018, pp. 23-24).

AE and RPL policies in Slovenia

Slovenia is a country located in Central Europe with a population of 2.07 million. It became a member of the EU in 2004. Today, it is considered a developed country: two-thirds of its economy is based on services and one-third on industry and construction. The GDP per capita is below the EU average, reaching 85% of the average in 2017. The unemployment rate has fallen in recent years, dropping to 5.6% in 2018. Similar to Portugal, Slovenia was severely hurt by the economic crisis, and its GDP is still lower than the pre-crisis level (EC, 2019b).

After independence in 1991, the Slovenian government introduced an array of systemic measures that gave a new impetus to the development of AE policy and infrastructure, among others, special laws (in 1996 and 2018) regulating non-formal AE and public interest in AE as well a law on national vocational qualifications (NVQs) establishing RPL procedures were adopted, and the government adopted national programmes for AE. Furthermore, with the formal accession into the EU, the Slovenian AE policy became significantly influenced by the EU due to the organisation's extensive financial support (see Mikulec & Jelenc Krašovec, 2016).

AE policy in Slovenia strives to balance personal, social and economic goals through the following: non-formal education (programmes for literacy skills, active citizenship, social cohesion, information and communication technologies [ICT]), formal education (programmes for improving formal education attainment of adults) and AE for the labour market (programmes of active labour market policy and RPL provision leading to NVQs) (National Assembly, 2004, 2013). However, in practice, more than 50% of all funds are dedicated to AE for labour market needs (Mikulec & Jelenc Krašovec, 2016).

Despite these measures and the data concerning the EU average of adults who have completed upper secondary and tertiary education (42.7%) (Eurostat, 2019b), the AE policy still faces many obstacles. Participation in AE and learning activities has fallen over the last few years, from 14.5% in 2014 to 11.4% in 2018 (Eurostat, 2019a). Moreover, the gap between vulnerable adults not willing to participate in AE and those with higher socio-economic status participating in AE has increased. The majority of adult population have low levels of literacy and numeracy according to the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) results: 62.6% of adults did not achieve the required level of literacy, and 60.1% lacked numeracy skills. Public funding is decreasing, and the development of AE is based only on ESF. Finally, the governance of AE policy also lacks efficiency (OECD, 2018b; SIAE, 2019).

In Slovenia, no comprehensive policy on RPL exists, as different sectoral legislation regulates RPL in the formal education system and in the labour market. Nevertheless, three major routes of RPL connected to different aims can be identified: (1) RPL can be used for stimulating participation in formal (vocational and tertiary) education through partial recognition of some mandatory parts of the educational programme (e.g., continuation of unfinished education or the changing the direction of education), but it provides no access to higher education for example; (2) RPL can be used to acquire NVQs through professional certification; and (3) recently, RPL can also be used to identify and assess an individual's knowledge and competences for better employability, career development and personal growth (SIAE, 2011, p. 36). In what follows, we will focus mainly on the second route—professional certification leading to NVQ—as this represents the most developed system of RPL in the country and is aimed at adults.

During the integration process of Slovenia into the EU, it was included in the EU's *Phare programmes*, which aimed to reform VET systems, including developing a certification system for professional education (NVQ) (Mikulec & Jelenc Krašovec, 2016). One of the outcomes of this process was that the government adopted a law on NVQs in 2000, which established the system of RPL based on the formal certification of working experiences of adults (18 or over)—including voluntary work, free-time activities, non-formal education and training—leading to a state-recognised NVQ (Uradni list RS, 2009). The introduced system was inspired (borrowed and adjusted) from the NVQ approach developed in UK, which is strongly output oriented and performance based (Bjørnåvold, 2000, p. 18).

The principles and procedures of RPL are based on prescribed procedures set out in the 'Rules on the method and procedure for assessment and certification of NVQs'

(Uradni list RS, 2015). The NVQ is defined as an occupational qualification required for the pursuit of a profession or individual assignments within the profession at a certain level of complexity (Uradni list RS, 2009, article 2). It represents the formally recognized competences required for practising the occupation on the basis of the national occupational standard. The same standards, where employers take a leading role in standard-setting processes, are used in educational programmes and RPL. NVQ can be acquired by completing (modules of) formal vocational programmes or through RPL (assessment and certification) process. When acquired through RPL, this is based on *Catalogues of standards of professional knowledge and skills*, which clearly defines the necessary knowledge and skills (learning outcomes), assessment criteria and certification procedures. The candidate for NVQ can demonstrate his/her previously acquired knowledge either by performing tasks set out in the catalogue or on the basis of a portfolio showing evidence (documents) of the knowledge acquired. The assessment and certification procedures are performed by certified institutions (providers), whereas the examination is carried out by an appointed three-member commission. The commission first evaluates the candidate's portfolio and then either certifies the candidate's qualifications or sends the candidate to a direct examination in front of the commission, if specific conditions set by the catalogue are not met. A successful candidate is issued a certificate proving his/her professional qualification (NVQ) but not an education degree (SIAE, 2011; Uradni list RS, 2009).

NVQs have been included in the NQF and placed in levels from two to six. From 2000 to 2018, 490 NVQs catalogues have been prepared, of which 350 are currently valid: three on the second level of the NQF, 35 on the third, 113 on the fourth, 106 on the fifth and 93 on the sixth. In this period, 94.711 certificates were granted, of which the majority were awarded on the fourth (65%) and third (17%) NQF levels. The most often awarded certificates in last six years are as follows: 'operator in the transport of dangerous goods', 'security guard', 'social care provider' and 'forestry cutter' (NRP, 2019).

Similarities and differences between Portugal and Slovenia

Similarities

Portugal and Slovenia are semiperipheral countries in the context of the EU. Both are small economies that have opened up in recent decades due to globalisation processes. Additionally, these countries seem to be constrained by the vertical influence of the EU, not only in terms of economic issues but also in LLL matters, supporting through these guidelines AE national policies. This influence seems very much related to the impact of the ESF. Following similar sets of guidelines and rules, the ESF norms have forced the adoption of different AE strategies, compelling the formulation and development of policies aimed at adapting adults to the needs of the labour market (Canário, Vieira & Capucha, 2019; Guimarães, 2012; Mikulec & Jelenc Krašovec, 2016) and supporting the development of RPL as an important provision.

The influence of the EU is clear too in the work achieved in local education and training centres in both countries. Following the EU guidelines concerning RPL, Portugal has become a relevant example in RPL implementation (Cavaco, Lafont & Pariat, 2014; Werquin, 2014) for those countries in which RPL is in an early stage. Similarly, in Slovenia, the development in RPL policies have led to the formalisation as well as the establishment of a dominant utilitarian approach to RPL (Fejes & Andersson, 2009; Harris, 1999), as this provision leads to qualifications and widening participation in secondary education. These policies include the set of RPL procedures and principles

established by the EU that may be found in official national documents. RPL is linked to the NQF, learning outcomes and quality assurance mechanisms; it is based on the same standards as formal education, which leads to qualifications based on established standards and frameworks.

Furthermore, in both countries, professional RPL has been used to help adults have their competences recognised and to re-enter the labour market. As an indirect outcome, in the policy documents of both countries under analysis, it is claimed that knowledge and skills visibility could enhance participation in formal (vocational) education through partial recognition of some mandatory parts of the educational programme (e.g., the continuation of unfinished education or changing the direction of education) or participation in higher (vocational) education and training programmes.

This claim, included in the policy documents of the two countries, is interesting if we consider that these countries present different rates concerning the education levels of their citizens (in 2018, 33.1% of Portuguese adults completed upper secondary and/or post-secondary education, whereas it was 49.4% for Slovenian adults, according to Eurostat, 2019b). This is despite the fact that both countries have low participation rates in LLL when compared to the benchmark established by the EU (15%) and rates from other countries, such as Sweden (29.2% in 2018) (Eurostat, 2019a). Despite all of these policy claims concerning this form of provision, there can be seen a strong formalisation of professional RPL leading to credentials (Cameron, 2012), but not a significant increase in access. In fact, we can still observe a low number of adults who have qualified from this form of provision in both countries.

Moreover, in both countries, validation procedures are closely connected to training arrangements. In policy discourses, thus, it is stated that this form of provision is aimed at the identification and assessment of individual's knowledge and competences for better employability, career development and personal growth. This situation can involve an increase in the social recognition of RPL. However, existing procedures of professional RPL in these two countries apply to qualifications of levels two to four (and five in Slovenia) of the European qualifications framework (EQF). Also, it is worth noting that in these countries, qualifications that can be obtained by adults through RPL are mainly for professions that are regulated and/or require low (or some medium) skilled workers. Accessibility and the quality of RPL, especially for low-skilled adults, remain a serious concern. The low awareness of the benefits of a professional qualification and of learning is an important motivational barrier for both adult learners and employers. Concerning the Portuguese situation, then, a stronger alignment of existing provisions with labour market needs is stressed in order to boost effectiveness, according to an OECD (2018a) evaluation.

Following this line of reasoning, it is important to question the reasons why so few adult learners are certified by this provision. These low numbers may express a paradox concerning RPL as a public provision in countries under analysis. If employers have a leading role in standard-setting processes for RPL and they represent key stakeholders for formulating RPL-based qualifications, it begs the question as to why social recognition of RPL remains low in the labour markets in both countries (cf. Young, 2006, p. 322). Again, if these forms of provision seem to share a utilitarian approach (Harris, 1999), which could be understood as an important point when it comes to employers expectations, RPL only seems to serve specific labour market sectors, namely the most regulated ones.

Differences

We can identify two major differences between these countries under analysis. First, in Portuguese policy discourses, RPL represents one of the main provisions of AE in the country. In terms of policy agenda, AE has received some attention in specific periods and as well as funding, even if most of it has been from the ESF; such funding improved access, especially from 2007 to 2011 and after 2016 (ANQEP, 2018). In Slovenia, however, the AE system is mainly based on formal and non-formal (general, vocational) educational programmes, whereas the RPL represents a more marginal form of provision.

Second, in Portugal, the RPL has a clear double purpose: through the formal school certification, it allows adults to raise their educational level to an upper secondary one as well as to gain professional qualification. School certification and professional qualifications obtained through RPL and education programmes have a different status in society and labour markets, as adult learners value school certificates but not so much professional qualifications, which is why the OECD (2018a) claims that pressuring employers to recognise professional qualifications is a relevant policy concern. On the contrary, RPL (leading to NVQ) has just one purpose in Slovenia: it allows adults to get professional qualifications. This has far reaching consequences in the Slovene case (SIAE, 2011): (a) qualifications obtained through the RPL and education programmes have different status in society and labour market; (b) the NVQs are disregarded in the wage system and poorly integrated into the system of collective agreements (cf. Lodigiani & Sarli, 2017, p. 140); (c) catalogues used in RPL are narrowly structured (performance based) and lack a representation of general knowledge (cf. Cameron, 2012, p. 88-89; Harris, 1999, p. 127-130); finally, (d) the NVQs are raising social segregation and inequalities, as the RPL system is used mainly by less educated adults, and the most acquired NVQs are for occupations requiring a lower skillset.

Therefore, our discussion shows that RPL for the professional certification of qualifications in Portugal and Slovenia—unlike the RPL directed at school certification or for access to (higher) education—does not involve clear educational aims or the development of new learning. Moreover, it does not necessarily bring clear benefits for adults and can, in fact, increase social segregation (Young, 2006, p. 325).

Conclusion

This paper compared RPL in Portugal and Slovenia. In both countries, this provision has been stressed in policy discourses, and the validation of experiential learning has been seen as an unproblematic and apolitical process of knowledge transferability. Learning is, therefore, considered an individual commodity, relevant for work and the labour market (Andersson, Fejes & Ahn, 2004; Harris, 1999).

Knowledge is measured according to normative terms, as the RPL in both countries is based on a wide range of formalised procedures, according to measurable performance and extrinsic value. In fact, claims for a stronger alignment between provisions and labour-market needs have increased, namely by promoting technical knowledge and skills. Thus, this situation raises doubts about the relevance of RPL that is prescribed by outcomes and standards as an AE provision as well as how it fits the learning developed in professional contexts.

The main influence of the guidelines and funding of the EU was also emphasized in this article. We have tried to show the following: (a) the employability agenda predominant in the EU RPL policy can be identified as main driving force of RPL in both national contexts; (b) the RPL utilitarian model, based on a common set of aims,

procedures and principles coming from EU RPL policy, is important in both countries; and (c) the idea of using RPL for adults with work experience to gain professional qualifications is important and noble one, but it can in practice lead to social segregation and greater inequalities in the labour market. Following the analytical models of Harris (1999) and Andersson, Fejes and Ahn (2004), this discussion has shown the importance of the RPL utilitarian approach, whereas other approaches to RPL seem to be less evident in both countries.

These conclusions allow us to reflect further on the utilitarian character of RPL and the blind spots, which should be discussed in-depth in further research and analysis. Among these, we can raise the question of the existence of a paradox related to the fact that employers in both countries have played a leading role in identifying and designing of qualifications that are to be recognised and certified—especially in strongly regulated professions and/or in the ones in which workers do not need to have extensive knowledge and skills while working—but RPL-based qualifications is not much valued in the labour market. In fact, when it comes to new jobs, such as the ones in more dynamic economic sectors (tourism, ICT), employers seem to prefer to hire other workers, such as the ones holding higher school education certificates (Canário, Vieira & Capucha, 2019). Therefore, it seems that the provision of RPL-based qualifications (lacking an education as well as training component) is directed mostly at low qualified adults and does not support them in getting the most relevant knowledge for the labour market and to get a more rewarding job. Following this line of reasoning, in countries in which RPL includes a path supporting the certification of school knowledge and skills, such as in Portugal, it remains a strong form of provision, as it promotes self-esteem and personal motivation for adults to reaching for higher levels of school education. From this point of view, it might be important to debate if the stronger dimension of RPL in both countries, i.e. its vocational and professional character, seems also to be its most striking weakness from the (adults' and) employer's points of view when the professional RPL is at stake.

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