

**Carlos Almeida**

*Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo / School of Education, Portugal*  
[calmeida@ese.ipvc.pt](mailto:calmeida@ese.ipvc.pt)

**Manuel Gama**

*Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo / School of Education, Portugal*  
[mea0911@gmail.com](mailto:mea0911@gmail.com)

**Antonio Jácomo**

*Portuguese Catholic University at Porto, Portugal*  
[ajacomo@porto.ucp.pt](mailto:ajacomo@porto.ucp.pt)

**Adalgisa Pontes**

*Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo / School of Education, Portugal*  
[adalgisapontes@ese.ipv.pt](mailto:adalgisapontes@ese.ipv.pt)

## Abstract

With the desire to promote excellence in higher education in Portugal and develop the Alto Minho region, the positive association that exists between art education in improving individual skills, and increasing cultural participation and academic results and Viana do Castelo School of Higher Education (VCHSE) was established. The determination of importance that the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo [IPVC] has in the plan to comply with the cultural strategy of Europe 2020 initiatives was the starting point for a group of teachers and researchers of to consider the weight of school capital and cultural consumption, in relationship to the lack of correlation between increased cultural offerings and increased cultural consumption. Through these investigations, VCHSE began to inquire into the relevance of designing and implementing a program of cultural intermediation that could develop students' cultural practices through art education, improving the skills of professionals qualified by the Institute.

The aim of this paper is to briefly present the VCHSE strategy to diagnosis the cultural practices of IPVC students in order to design a pilot program, *Cultural Intermediation in Higher Education in Viana do Castelo*, which will be implemented at the VCHSE.

**Keywords:** cultural intermediation; cultural offer; cultural practices

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<sup>1</sup> Expanded version of the presentation given on May 27th, 2014 at the 9th International Conference of the Arts, in Viana do Castelo, Portugal.

### **The starting point of *Cultural Intermediation in Higher Education in Viana do Castelo***

The importance of culture and creativity in the competitiveness of Europe (KEA European Affairs, 2006), as well as in the affirmation of cities at the regional, national and international levels (Florida, 2005), supports the UNESCO (2006) findings that art education plays an important role in the educational process for the development of individual skills and cultural participation. These investigations were the starting point for a group of teachers and researchers of VCHSE to begin to inquire the relevance of designing and implementing a program of cultural intermediation that could develop students' cultural practices through art education, improving the skills of professionals qualified by this school. Cultural intermediation in higher education encourages alliances with institutional networks and regional resources using cultural and social methodologies in order to develop new constellations of networks, and their discursive practices on behalf of cultural activities in communities today. Drawing upon the idea that culture is mediated through social spaces, cultural intermediation points to the institutional role in education to lead in the professionalization of change processes in the social dimensions of culture.

VCHSE courses are particularly relevant for the development of skills in cultural intermediation in the cultural sector since they already draw upon professional programs in arts and cultural management, whose aim it is to develop arts and cultural managers, cultural workers, teachers, and researchers in the cultural sector. By building upon bachelor's degree study in arts and cultural management, students can continue their professionalizing study and practice at VCHSE through to the Master's level, building skills sets in increments along the way, strengthening the impact of competency implementation in the sector. This means that already each year, the cultural sector is receiving many new, highly trained and qualified managers from VCHSE, who are graduating with professional competencies positioned to contribute new skills in the management of cultural enterprises, cultural operators and institutions. Knowing this, we thus observed that the acquisition of skill sets in intermediation can also contribute to individual transformation. At the present time, Alto Minho region has the opportunity to place real agents of change in key sectors such as education, arts management and social gerontology. The benefit of a new program in this area would be to bring the benefits of art education and cultural management into community-based approaches to cultural development.

In November 2012, in order to profile the group of fifteen students in the Master's in Arts and Cultural Management program, a survey questionnaire was distributed. The main conclusions were: a) students had a careless or retracted cultural practice (Gomes, 2004); b) there were some who had a profile of cultural consumption which was pervasive/cumulative/fragmented (Santos & Pais, 2010). The results are in line with national trends (Santos, 2007) and profiled cultural practices of other groups of students in higher education (Fernandes, 2001). This kind of remark is of particular concern and reveals itself as a huge weakness considering expectations when entering the labor market (especially in a group whose professional future involves the development of strategies for the cultural development of the public population). Thus, it seems clear that, at least in this small sample of 15 students, the implementation of a cultural intermediation program can help minimize the problem and develop cultural practices of future arts managers in Alto Minho.

Considering that it is not our intent to restrict the designed program to the students of the Master in Arts and Cultural Management degree, it becomes necessary to gather evidence that is pertinent and

relevant to apply its premises to different courses of the VCHSE school. During this process of conducting action research on students' observations, the regional strategic plan for Alto Minho for the Europe 2020 initiative was released (2013). This plan resulted in a deep study that aimed to establish a diagnosis, a vision, a strategy and an action plan for the next programming period of EU Structural Funds. The study for Alto Minho indicates that the focus of the region should be on the development of programs and projects to help it become more competitive, more attractive, more connected and more resilient through improved quality, efficiency and openness of its higher education in order to contribute to and increase the levels of participation and attainment of the local population (Augusto Mateus & Associados, 2013).

It was bearing this in mind that the Cultural Intermediation project was designed. Its main objective was to begin by conducting a needs assessment through a diagnosis of student participation in cultural activities and then to diagnosis the cultural offer within the overall IPVC educational system. In order to determine what kinds of cultural activities IPVC students engaged in and to what degree their involvement in the cultural sector is, a questionnaire for the 2015 school year will be designed to determine how extensive and intensive their cultural practices were during 2014. This information will serve as the baseline data for designing and structuring competencies for a new program, *Cultural Intermediation in Higher Education in Viana do Castelo*, to be implemented at VCHSE.

The needs assessment is to be designed across the four locations of the IPVC schools in order to determine the relationship between the cultural offer of the IPVC schools; their role in the development of the cultural practices of the academic community; the faculty and staff; the municipalities; and the students in order to tailor the design of a pilot program to the needs of the regional development plan. Together with the application of surveys and the creation of focus groups, an analysis of public documents will establish the baseline for the final evaluation of the pilot program. This information is necessary for determining how to adapt the program to the needs of prospective students in the remaining schools of the IPVC in alignment with the regional 2020 goals.

The innovation of the project lies not only in the type of analysis used to evaluate the cultural practices of the students, but also in its use of strategic visioning and planning processes to improve and consolidate cultural practices. Built into the proactive design of the pilot program is also the fact that there never was such a program implemented in Alto Minho before. It is clear that the promotion of excellence in higher education through the establishment of a dynamic and positive interaction between institutions and students is not new (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) – just as an analysis of cultural practices is not new (Bourdieu, 1992). The innovation of this program for the production of knowledge in the cultural sector and its research area lays in the fact of its transversality – being a vehicle that will allow us to look at the problem holistically.

One of the misconceptions that exists regarding art education is related to the fact that it is often used instrumentally to create audiences (Bamford, 2007). By focusing on the interactive elements of the cultural sector and supporting its mediation, we intend to broaden the uses and purposes of art and cultural education into the animation of culture beyond its predetermined, institutional borders. The result will be the definition of a strategy to produce a new kind of professionalizing training for the cultural sector that will create new cultural opportunities in the region. Using art education for the construction of a relevant and participatory program integrated into VCHSE, IPVC and the Alto Minho

region, will contribute to the development of students as well as that of the community's cultural enrichment.

#### **Four Levels of Diagnosis for a Holistic Analysis**

##### **1. Cultural offer diagnosis of the municipalities in the locations of the six IPVC Schools**

An analysis of the cultural practices of a population should include a synthetic study on cultural offers in order to establish a consistent relationship between consumer preferences and the range of options available.

Considering that the six IPVC Schools are placed in four locations of Alto Minho, a diagnosis of the cultural offers in the municipalities of Melgaço, Ponte de Lima, Valença and Viana do Castelo was planned. The diagnosis is based on the analysis of a set of public documents normally used for the marketing, public relations, and information dissemination of cultural events (e.g. municipalities' webpages and cultural agendas; local newspapers, etc.) produced between the months of January and December 2014. For an exhaustive survey of such documents in each of the four locations, we will have the collaboration from IPVC's scientific area of Art, Design and Humanities, since they teach in all IPVC schools and, therefore, have easier access to documents produced in different locations. In addition to this generic set of documents, narrative statements will be extracted from interviews to complement gathered information. The selection of the period of analysis of the cultural offer in municipalities is consistent with the fact that the questionnaire, which will be implemented between January and February 2015, focuses on the cultural practices of IPVC students for the past 12 months.

Document analysis will be performed using a database grid especially designed for the purpose. Key words and thematic categories will be created from the set of activities that include the cultural and creative sectors. A set of defined subcategories will establish a relationship between the type of the event, the promoter, the degree of professionalization of the producing entity, the cost of membership, location, the day of the week and the time of realization. The development of this diagnosis foresees a joint coordination with IPVC's Bachelor's degree and Master courses in Arts and Cultural Management. Degree finalists and master students will be directly involved in the process of data collection, which will allow them to participate in a research that is expected to contribute to the implementation of a process which is to bring improvement and change to IPVC.

##### **2. The use of IPVC's cultural diagnosis on the activities for the promotion of cultural practices among the academic community of the IPVC institutions**

Higher education institutions gather individuals with different positions and predispositions and different symbolic universes, working as a socializing agent of individuals with different cultural practices. Thus, the perception of how higher institutions of education face this mission is vital for the development of a strategy that contributes to the qualification of IPVC's academic community, especially students.

Considering that IPVC has six schools, we will do a detailed study of each of them focusing on the activities promoted in the year 2014, aiming at the development of the cultural practices of students, teachers and non-teaching staff. For the overall analysis of the cultural actions of IPVC in this field, we

will analyze a set of official documents of the institution together with news published on the IPVC website in 2014. The analysis of this data will follow a similar logic to the diagnosis of the cultural offers of the municipalities. In addition, focus groups will be created including key stakeholders of the institution, including representatives of the presidency of the General Council, of the Technical and Scientific Council, of the IPVC scientific area of Art, Design and Humanities and of the Academic Federation.

For the analysis of the specific cultural actions of each of the IPVC schools, we will analyze them in relationship to a set of documents from each school (e.g. course reports, course programs) plus the news published on their specific websites in the year 2014. Furthermore, two focus groups will be created in each school: one with representatives of the Board, of the Pedagogical Council, of the Students Association, the non-teaching staff, of the library and of ongoing projects, and one with representatives of the courses' coordination team and their students.

The thirteen focus groups have two main purposes: to ascertain the validity of the preliminary findings resulting from the analysis of the documents with contextual factors and participant reflections on the content analysis of the existing cultural offer; and to sensitize participants to the importance of further developing cultural practices among IPVC's academic community. Results will allow us to know IPVC's activities for the promotion of cultural practices among the academic community and what recommendations can be made to further develop them.

### **3. Diagnosis of VCHSE employees' cultural practices**

For the solid implementation of this pilot program of intervention, it is imperative to also focus on those who deal with students daily. It is crucial that teachers and staff have these practices anchored in order to facilitate and maximize the involvement of students.

Taking into consideration that the main objective of the strategic planning research is to come up with a program of action based on the diagnosis in order to design the pilot at VCHSE, this third diagnosis becomes vital for the congruence of this research. A questionnaire survey will be carried out in February 2015 for all employees who are serving in this school system in order to measure the cultural practices of VCHSE's staff. All teachers who have lectured in any curricular unit at VCHSE in the year 2014 will be considered; in the case of employees, all IPVC officials who have had their main workplace at the facilities of VCHSE over the same period will be included.

The questionnaire will be created especially for this purpose in relationship to data collection instruments applied in other similar studies carried out in national and international public contexts. At the end of this analysis, it will be possible to diagnosis the extent and quality of cultural practices of teachers and non-teaching staff of VCHSE.

### **4. Diagnosis of IPVC students' cultural practices**

The profiling of the student' cultural diagnosis is of particular importance for the success of the whole program. At the end of this task it will be possible to know the cultural practices of IPVC students for determining the baseline data for a longitudinal study of personal and institutional cultural offer development.

Firstly, it will allow the profiling of IPVC students' cultural practices in year 2014 with all the advantages such information can bring to wider agents in a variety of areas. Secondly, the results obtained for VCHSE will be essential for the design of the action plan to be implemented at IPVC and to gradually expand to other schools. Thirdly, it will allow for a baseline to be developed that will be important for an analysis of the longitudinal evolution of cultural practices among students who actively participated in the study; and to assess the impact on students' cultural practices over the first three years of initial training.

Data collection will use the same instrument used in the employees' diagnosis. This task will have the collaboration of IPVC's scientific area of Art, Design and Humanities and of all courses' coordination teams at VCHSE, aiming at the creation of multidisciplinary groups that will go to all six schools sensitizing students for their participation in this project. At the end of this task it will be possible to know the cultural practices of IPVC students.

### **The design of the pilot action program**

All four diagnoses are vital to establish a grounded relationship between the cultural offer of the sampled sites and the cultural practices of the academic community and, thus, the role of IPVC Schools on the development of these cultural practices. The feature that is considered most important in the development of this program, is that the design of the pilot program is not based solely on conclusions drawn from the analysis of data collected over the tasks previously outlined – it also includes strategies for an intensive action plan which will contemplate how to catalyze the active participation of VCHSE's entire community. We hereby seek to create conditions for an authentic involvement of all sectors of VCHSE in this phase so that the integration and implementation of the pilot program is seen as an important initiative of the entire academic community for the qualification of the individual and the benefit of the VCHSE communities at large.

This last phase is structured in three major stages: 1) the VCHSE Cultural Space; 2) a Multidisciplinary Artistic Experimentation; and 3) an International Seminar.

The VCHSE's Cultural Space is a particularly important place. Students, teachers and non-teaching staff will be invited and challenged to contribute ideas for the transformation of the physical facilities in order to be make them available for this purpose and to be located in a privileged spot of the VCHSE's old building. An official opening will occur on the first weekend of March 2015, during a '40 hour non-stop' that is to rely on the involvement of the academic community at large. Driven in collaboration with Bachelors degree and Master's students in Arts and Cultural Management, the new space will be permanently open to the public and complemented by the creation of a virtual space available on the internet.

The second stage of this phase will take place during the month of February 2015 with the promotion of a number of initiatives related to artistic experimentation in order to enhance cultural practices. During this month, a set of intensive training actions will be promoted to allow the academic community of VCHSE to make contact with some special forms of artistic expression. The final selection of activities to be developed depends on the outcome of the first stage of the data analysis. It should be noted that the rate of adherence to proposed initiatives and the results of some specific initiatives that are already pre-defined (i.e. such as an action within the performing arts, during which drama and

theater will be used to enhance the creative manifestation of expectations and needs of VCHSE community in relation to their cultural practices), will depend upon the actual conditions for building an appropriate pilot action program that contributes to the mission of further developing VCHSE's cultural practices.

The last stage of this phase is the organization of an international seminar to be held in June 2015 and during which we will present the preliminary results of the study and a version of the pilot program.

We hope that, with this strategy, the pilot program will be the first step of a journey that will be both consistent with and consequent to the implementation of a process of change in higher education in Alto Minho, contributing to the qualification of the region by promoting excellence in IPVC.

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