

Recognition of prior learning at the centre of a national strategy: Tensions between professional gains and personal development

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Abstract

This paper focuses on recognition of prior learning as part of a national policy based on European Union guidelines for lifelong learning, and it explains how recognition of prior learning has been perceived since it was implemented in Portugal in 2000. Data discussed are the result of a mixed method research project that surveyed adult learners, some of whom were interviewed, who successfully completed the recognition of prior learning process from 2007 to 2011 in a new opportunities centre. Adult educators, and workplace representatives from the companies in which these adults in the recognition of prior learning process were working, were also part of the survey. A theme-based content analysis was done on the resulting data. Findings revealed tension between the goals of economic and human resource management and the change experienced by these adult learners in their professional status. Based on these results, the closing remarks to this article highlight the tensions caused by the failure of the goals of the policy to which recognition of prior learning was central, and the personal and social changes referred to by learners. Important educational changes were achieved although they were undermined by the adult education policy and European Union guidelines.

Keywords

Recognition of prior learning, European Union guidelines for lifelong learning, adult education policy, Portugal

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Theoretical analysis and its association with national adult education policies

Recognition of prior learning¹ (RPL) has been a substantive topic in theoretical debates within education (Andersson & Harris, 2006; Harris, Breier, & Wihak, 2011; Harris, Wihak, & Van Kleef, 2014). Analyses may adopt different approaches, such as the assessment theory, the sociology of education, post structuralism or situated knowledge/learning-based theory, the theory of complexity and social action, or symbolic interactionism. Experiential learning theory is particularly relevant in that it attaches special importance to the progressive and radical aspects of RPL (Andersson & Osman, 2008).

Methodologies used in assessing, recognising and validating knowledge and skills acquired by adults outside the formal education system have been discussed at length, and several aspects have been underscored, including that of reflection (Andersson, 2006). Besides this, many authors have discussed the role of RPL in self-assessment, self-confidence and individual empowerment in people seeking formal education but who do not have the required entrance requirements (see Evans, 2000).

These discussions have been accompanied by the critical analysis of policies that post-date the emergence of RPL as a policy area and a concept in education policy. Analyses have highlighted the ideological approaches upon which RPL is based. Emphasis has been laid on specific strategies devoted mainly to promoting social justice by increasing access and participation in education and training, and by assessing other forms of knowledge acquisition, acquired through non-formal and informal learning in the context of economic perspectives for lifelong learning (Harris, 1999). This article seeks to address these concerns.

In line with authors such as Griffin (1999a, 1999b), Olessen (2004) and Sáenz Fernandez (2006), the theoretical debate on adult education policy today suggests three approaches to this policy. Although referred to separately in this article, these three approaches are connected and can be applied together. Therefore, cross-fertilisation or hybridisation may occur in policies, and one or more of these approaches may be more prominent than the others (Guimarães, 2011). For each approach a link will be made to adult education policy developments in Portugal over the past four decades.

The first approach includes the *democratic-emancipatory education policies* that stress the influence of critical pedagogies upholding the idea that education is lifelong, humanist, aiming at social development, promoting social justice, and democratic and cosmopolitan citizenship (Lima, 2008). A multi-faceted view of development (social, economic, cultural and political) and participation (social, political and civic) is associated with this understanding. One of the political priorities is to build a democratic, participatory society by applying a fundamental social right: education. Solidarity, social justice and the common good are important and justify establishing basic education and education for democratic citizenship programmes. They also justify implementing a broad range of initiatives to

promote a civic sense and a critical, reasoned capacity based on social mobility, civil society organisations and state support (Griffin, 1999a, p. 334). The focus is on the educational (and not simply instructional) nature of the initiatives, building on local cultural traditions, along with the life experience and worldly knowledge of adults. The aim is to forge a link between knowledge and the development of independent, experienced people (Olessen, 2004). The individual act of learning needs to be linked to what is publicly on offer to be learnt. The goals of learning are predominantly of a social and indirectly academic nature. Learning starts in social relations, continues throughout life, in all its aspects, based on social needs and leads to educational programmes designed for adults and their perceived needs (Sánchez Fernández, 2006, p. 82).

Many education initiatives were developed in the context of people-based education activities that were part of policy in Portugal between 1974 and 1976, and again between 1979 and the mid-1980s. These initiatives were adopted within the context of the democratic–emancipatory education policies being developed at the time. They were not seen as RPL measures, but they sought to use the experience and acquired learning of adults in non-formal and formal education contexts. This learning was acquired in the social participation that came with the democracy of those years. Pedagogic and educational structure was highly varied and complex. Learning was achieved through social upheaval. It became part of the process of social, cultural, economic, political and civic change that marked society at the time (Guimarães, 2011).

The second approach covering *education policies for modernisation and state control*, in which education is seen as a benefit in the context of social and economic modernisation, are based on the interplay between democracy and economics. As education is an essential pillar of social policy, it involves processes that aim to ensure equal opportunity for all, particularly for those less likely to gain access to education. However, education that is predominantly school teaching is essential for training citizens (Griffin, 1999a). The rules associated with expanding opportunities for access to successful education are increasingly evident in practice, and processes are now regulated and official (Lima, 2008). The most striking education advances reduce adult education to formal and second chance education, and stress the importance of vocational training in promoting economic growth within the schoolification of other modes of education (Olessen, 2004). The education approach is largely reduced to ‘reading, writing and arithmetic’, to academic learning and to school-type vocational training. Sánchez Fernández says that it promotes ‘receiving and mastering literacy’. Seeking to ‘discipline the adult population’ and to ‘educate to obey’, it advances the instrumental (but not social) use of reading and writing, and the results of education practices illustrate the efforts at social control and the reproduction of social inequalities (Sánchez Fernández, 2006, pp. 75–77).

In Portugal, democratic–emancipatory education policies suffered a radical cut back when the Basic Law on the Education System was approved and when Portugal joined the European Economic Community in 1986. Prior to that school certification had recognised learning acquired through experience in the

context of critical education activities. From then on formal adult education, or second opportunity learning, grew in importance within education policies aiming at modernisation and state control. Experience and learning were no longer so important in the context of public supply. Pedagogic and educational processes were made official, standardised and harmonised. Evening school courses for adults encouraged conformity and social inclusion, while they prepared adults (minimally) for the labour force working in the companies operating at the time, and from then for a new national economy and the effects of globalisation (Guimarães, 2011).

The third approach involves *education policies for human resources management*, which still encourage redistributive principles providing economic development benefits from this. Increasing competition, productivity and flexibility must be addressed by education and training systems (Griffin, 1999a, 1999b). Although education retains an important public dimension, the individual takes on new responsibilities. Among these are 'learning to adapt as an individual' to change and to 'being able to decide and make choices' in finding the best options in a context of social and economic change. This is where we find education and economics drawing closer, in the appeal 'learning for earning' (Guimarães, 2011), seeing education (training and learning) as an investment, with frequent analogies between training and financial capital and learners being responsible and accepting responsibility for their choices (Olesen, 2004). In these policies, learners are those who learn throughout life in places and at times outside the school context, and RPL is very much valued. Above all, knowledge has a utility value. Consequently, learning converts the individual into one of the most attractive investments for business and a priority for workers. In this scenario, 'the productivity and competitiveness of economic agents are based on their ability to process and apply knowledge effectively' (Sánchez Fernández, 2006, p. 94). As argued by Harris (1999), although there are several 'ways of looking at RPL', particularly when an interpretation of practices is at stake, we believe that RPL has promoted human resources management in education policies. The use of RPL meets the EU's lifelong learning guidelines and has progressed well in adult education policy in Portugal. This is due mainly to the aims established for lifelong learning and to those found in the national strategy for adult education.

RPL in the EU and in Portugal

The EU's interest in RPL began in the 1990s, and more specifically in 2000 with publication of the Memorandum of Lifelong Learning (EC, 2000). Aiming to coordinate the RPL process with education and training systems, its implementation (referred to by the EU as *Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning*) led to considerable emphasis on the RPL process in EU documents. These documents held that individuals learned throughout life and that this learning needed to be formally recognised. Two key ideas were emphasised. One was the impact of RPL on social justice, and the other was the contribution RPL made to social change as

a result of individual empowerment. These key ideas, according to our theoretical analysis, are related to some extent to the aims of democratic and emancipatory education policies and to education policies for modernisation and state control. In addition, several political commitments and guidelines add to the guidelines of the Memorandum. However, in recent years there has been a shift in policy: the focus is no longer on social justice and social change, but more on the role played by RPL in economic development (Andersson, Fejes, & Sandberg, 2013), in line with the goals of education for human resources management.

This shows how the significance attached to RPL has changed subtly in the recent past. Now that there is a European Qualification Framework, the goals of RPL involve professional competencies and these are related to the competencies of the labour market (Barros, 2012; Werquin, 2014). Consequently RPL, and particularly its validation, now has a more central role in promoting employability, due to a preference for learning related to work and economic development and to holding individuals accountable for the choices they make in their education and training (Andersson et al., 2013). Similarly, according to Evans (2000), this has been a trend in several countries and the concept of employability, central to an understanding of RPL in current policy, has been presented as the need for each individual to be primarily responsible for acquiring skills of economic value that will guarantee the individual's ability to meet the demands of the labour market.

In recent decades, policies that included RPL were implemented in various countries, as in Portugal. Based on a reinterpretation of EU guidelines, the principles of lifelong learning entered the debate on national policy that emphasised increasing economic competitiveness, improving employability and investing in human resources. An important goal was to qualify labour according to EU standards. But it has to be said that there was tension due to the clash of the different aims of the same policy. Solving the 'educational deficit', unacceptable for democracy, and demonstrated by the low schooling levels of the adult population, was also a key point in policy making. Schooling levels in Portugal were also found to be significantly lower than in other European Union (EU) countries. To create new and innovative companies and to strengthen economic sectors by basing them on knowledge and technology, human resources management guidelines stressed the importance of promoting employability and boosting Portugal's position within the global economy, a move also observed in other countries (Evans, 2000). Within this context RPL became more prominent in policy planning and an objective in managing human resources. This approach was fundamental to reviving the Portuguese economy and emphasising the state's role in providing basic education within the context of education guidelines for modernisation and state control. It also promoted social justice and change, and improved access to education and training.

National policy documents focussed on balancing the promotion of democracy with economic development. The objectives were to democratise access to knowledge and in this way improve economic development and social justice (NO, 2005). RPL as a public service was also based on arguments that stressed equality of

opportunity and individual empowerment, and again looked to increasing competitiveness (Cavaco, 2007; Dukevot, 2014). In fact the political focus on RPL involved goals aiming to boost productivity and increase the production of goods and services supported by using a more qualified workforce. RPL was for all individuals who had no basic education qualification (nine years of formal schooling or, after 2007, 12 years of schooling) and/or a vocational qualification (levels 1, 2, 3 and 4, according to EU guidelines). RPL has been the public service that mobilised most learners in recent years. From 2000 to 2005, around 50,000 adults achieved basic education certification (ninth grade). After 2005, and particularly after 2007, mass access became a serious political concern. A new phase in public policy for adult education began, with 386,463 adults achieving ninth and 12th grade qualifications in state, private and non-governmental new opportunities centres (NOC) (ANQ, 2011). These impressive levels of attendance led to several authors agreeing with public policy. They also motivated learners even more to join other education and training activities as a result of their RPL experience, as the CIEE (2007) reports, contributing in this way to involving poorly qualified adults in further learning.

Despite this approval of RPL, there was some criticism. Barros (2013) noted that RPL was seen more as a duty. In the context of major economic change, adults were to acquire technical skills and adapt to new social and working environments. In this sense progress involved an individual rather than a public approach, leading to RPL being seen as a strategic device with the social purpose of creating a new form of social exclusion rather than an innovative form of social inclusion. Others (among these Lima and Guimarães, 2011) claimed that RPL was a false right to education and training (and a false route to social justice) in that low-qualified learners did not learn a great deal in the process. But it was a powerful device for making adults feel responsible for their own educational and social success or failure and the capacity to become employable and competitive on the labour market.

Methodology used in the study

This article is an outcome of the research project Educational Pathways and Adult Lives (*Percursos Educativos e Vidas dos Adultos*) commissioned by the NOC Homem, Cávado and Ave Highlands Development Association (*Associação para o Desenvolvimento das Terras Altas do Homem, Cávado e Ave*). It was carried out by the Unit for Adult Education of the University of Minho between May and November 2011 (Lima, 2012).

This research came about because the Association wanted to examine the influence of RPL activities and the impact RPL had on the lives of adults who obtained fourth, sixth, ninth and/or 12th grade school certificates. The period covered began when the NOC first provided the RPL service in 2006. Of the specific objectives involved, this paper focuses on how learners assessed the benefits of the qualification they had acquired. It also looks at changes in behaviour, attitude and life

(particularly in professional terms) suggested by learners themselves; the adult educators working at the NOC; and representatives of the companies where learners were working, during and after their RPL experience.

Based on the research project, in this paper RPL is seen as a public service that is part of a national strategy (Griffin, 1999a, 1999b) for adult education. The strategy is based on different policy guidelines, particularly those geared to education for human resources management, which, due to the influence of the EU, has become increasingly important in Portugal, as have other policies for modernisation and state control (such as raising levels of education and attendance levels in non-formal and informal adult education). The tension resulting from these different policy guidelines raises the following questions: what are the links between RPL as a public education service for adults in the context of a national strategy influenced by lifelong learning guidelines and the goals expressed in adult education policy? What impact does RPL have on the lives of learners, assessed based on the opinions of learners themselves, adult educators working in RPL and representatives of the companies where learners were working? The purpose of this article is to discuss with RPL learners, adult educators and representatives of companies, what effect supranational guidelines, and those applied in the national strategy on which RPL was built, had in the process. These were three major stakeholders, two of them involved directly in RPL and one in the practice of adult education. Their views could explain the true benefits these learners enjoyed after successfully completing the process. Bearing in mind the main goals of the policy programme, including RPL, this paper adopts a bottom-up analytical approach in attaching more importance to the opinions of local stakeholders, the intention being to understand the meaning that interviewees attached to how they had benefitted and comparing this with policy goals.

The data analysed throughout is the result of a mixed methodological strategy (quantitative and qualitative) based on a survey using a self-administered questionnaire and interviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The first stage of data collection used a questionnaire to help identify perceived gains (individual, professional and collective) in the answers provided by learners after RPL. The resulting data should answer the question on how RPL had an impact on life changes perceived by learners, those responsible for the companies where learners were working and adult educators. This in turn threw light on the national strategy for adult education and EU lifelong learning guidelines. Questions were asked to identify learners (date of birth, gender, school diploma held before and after concluding RPL, job and professional experience, etc.), perceived advantages that motivated learners to seek further education, training and learning activities, professional life changes (change of job, work position, rise in salary, etc.), acquisition of knowledge and skills, reading and writing practices used by learners in everyday life and professional contexts, and political and civic involvement. These were key questions, as learners had not previously participated in either formal or non-formal adult education activities. The answers to these questions helped understand the impact of RPL on motivating learners to seek education and training and on

how interviewees perceived the advantages of this as well as the improvements RPL brought to their professional lives, whether or not it met the goals of public policy.

The questionnaire involved a group of 1439 individuals, all learners undergoing RPL in the same NOC. Learners were invited to answer the questionnaire and return it by post to the address of the NOC. Four hundred and ten questionnaires were completed (28.5% of the group). Most respondents were women (63.7%), born between 1958 and 1981, 28.5% born between 1970 and 1975 and 20.7% between 1964 and 1969. Seventy-eight per cent were married with two children (31.2%) or one child (28.5%), most of whom were of school age. Almost half of the respondents (45.9%) had sixth grade schooling at the time of enrolment in RPL, while 23.2% had ninth grade and 19.3% fourth grade. It was the ninth grade certificate that most respondents obtained (64.4%) after concluding RPL, while 32.9% completed 12th grade.

The second stage of data collection involved semi-structured interviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Individuals who completed RPL were interviewed (four men and four women between the ages of 30 and 60, in which four adults obtained ninth grade and four 12th grade). These interviewees, selected by the adult educators involved in RPL at the NOC, were selected because they answered the questionnaire and were known for having expressed opinions on RPL on other occasions, referring to the impact of the process on their lives, and they were also prepared to be interviewed. Eight adult educators working at the NOC were also interviewed. They were selected because they had been involved in RPL for more than two years and were acquainted with learners and learning changes that had taken place during the RPL process. Four representatives from local companies where learners were working during RPL were also interviewed. These were selected because they had encouraged learners to join RPL during working hours and were responsible for successful local businesses. Interested in having their employees assessed by RPL, the resulting data helped these companies understand the professional impact of RPL (job changes, diversification of job tasks, etc.).

In interviewing learners, questions aimed to throw more light on the answers to the questionnaire by getting in-depth data on perceived advantages. In their interviews, adult educators referred to RPL achievements and identified the impact they had on the lives of learners during and after the process. When interviewed, representatives of the companies where learners in RPL were working (in cases where these learners were employed), questions aimed to detect the advantages acquired by learners as workers after concluding the RPL process.

Quantitative and statistical data resulting from the questionnaire provided a sociographic description of learners involved in RPL. Thematic content analysis was used to examine interviews, the aim being to describe and organise content, involving knowledge assessment results from the RPL process. Different indicators (Bardin, 1977) of knowledge acquisition, changes in behaviour, attitude and the description learners gave of shifts (or their absence) in employment and professional fields were noted in writing this article. These indicators emerged from the

interviews, questionnaire and selected interview items. The aim was to understand the perceived advantages of RPL in acquiring new knowledge and how this motivated learners to continue their education and training and to change job positions or work (for instance, get a new job).

The data provided a wide range of information. For the purpose of this article, an analysis was undertaken on whether interviewees said they had made professional changes or not after RPL and on what knowledge had been acquired. The idea was to understand the advantages identified by the interviewees and how these advantages related to national strategy goals for adult education and EU guidelines on lifelong learning, and so answer the questions raised in this paper.

Advantages of RPL expressed by learners, adult educators and companies where learners were working

Few changes in professional dimensions

According to the questionnaire, once RPL was completed, 63.6% (253 individuals) remained in the job they had at the start of the process, while a small number (nine individuals) changed jobs. It should be noted also that 27.6% (110 individuals) were unemployed. For more than half of these (74 individuals), the situation remained unchanged at the end of the process. Of the respondents who remained employed, 54.9% said that the process did not further their chances of getting a new position at work, a new job or even a new career. 53.2% also said that RPL had not helped them to set up their own company or help a friend or relative to start their own business.

Subsequently, at local level, RPL and the opinions learners had on the process seemed to differ from the rhetoric of policy. Similar to other research on RPL, it did not appear to contribute substantially to changing the professional status of respondents (Amorim & Fragoso, 2010), in contrast to the major political goals of managing human resources as part of boosting the Portuguese economy. Data revealed considerable tension between the national strategy priority that aimed to increase employability, and the professional and employment circumstances of respondents. Many highlighted the fact that the certificate obtained through RPL did not change the professional status they had prior to beginning the process. The performance of these learners at work, according to company representatives, did not change either:

Well, right now my situation is much the same as many other Portuguese people. I'm unemployed. The only difference is my level of schooling. Before, my level of schooling was low, and now I am sending out CVs and placing myself at a different level, that of 9th grade. (...) But at professional level, nothing is moving, unfortunately (...).
(Learner 01)

The advantages of concluding RPL are weak, or almost non-existent, for these workers aiming to promote their careers. This is because progress is made only through years of service. (Company representative 03)

For some of those who were employed, the situation was somewhat different. Portugal has been experiencing economic change for the past few decades. In economic terms, the demands and requirements for product and service certification are increasing. In individual terms, these demands and requirements have become the demand for qualification and the corresponding professional skills. This is why both learners and adult educators referred to the importance of having a school certificate for work associated with tourism, catering and civil construction, for example. They also referred to the need to attend vocational training courses geared to sectors such as driving, health and safety, and handling industrial or agricultural equipment. This was mentioned by a learner and an adult educator:

Yes, (after completing RPL) I attended two training courses that were only open to me with my 9th year certificate. I attended the European Course in First Aid and the Housing Credit Certified Professional training course at the regional Trade Association and at the Portuguese Red Cross. (Learner 07)

(RPL) contributed to improving the employability of learners or helped them continue in the job they already had because it allowed them to attend training courses that demanded higher levels of schooling. However, to attend these training courses they had to have the 6th or 9th year. Many farmers got on with life using what they had learnt in school as children. But they had to complete RPL to attend training. Many civil construction crane operators also appeared. Crane operators must now have the Certificate of Professional Aptitude and to get this they must have the 9th year. (Adult educator 01)

Although RPL did not have a strong impact on the professional lives of learners, it did have the advantage of opening the way to education and training activities. So it did affect opinions on the relevance of education and training and on motivation to continue with further education and training programmes. Surprisingly, for others, such as unemployed respondents, the school certificate obtained after RPL had the advantage of bringing hope (Canário, 2008). Learners realised that not having a certificate was an insurmountable barrier to get a new job or a better professional position. Although not necessarily identified as an advantage, RPL was at least seen as a possibility leading to a new and better job, of attendance at a training programme, ambitions also emphasised by adult educators. In this sense, RPL provided the promise of a life that would be all the better for having a school diploma. The following extracts illustrate this point:

I really enjoyed going through this process. I got the 12th year certificate, which is already a big plus. In future, if I need to look for a job, I will be able to show my 12th

year academic qualifications. Then I will be on the same footing as others who are applying. (Learner 03)

I think advantages are essentially personal. Perhaps it's also a sign of the times? Today, no one is going through this process imagining they are going to be promoted the next day. Well, they may think that, but it is probably not going to be tomorrow. But an opportunity may come. (Adult educator 03)

Similar to several adult education policy documents, many of the respondents made the connection between their career paths and their level of schooling, as part of a strategy to foster life changes. They accepted that life was limited by a lack of schooling and missed opportunities because they had no school certificate. So in having a certificate these individuals knew that, whether they were employed or jobless, this improved their position on the job market. Learners realised that their employability had improved, even if the changes were only subjective (Ávila, 2008; Barros, 2013). In fact, if there were any changes, they were mainly personal and boosted social development, in over-estimating perceived advantages in their subjective assessment of their situation. Because of this, the goals of human resources management covered by the national adult education policy do not seem to have been met. But interviewees explained they were more motivated and mobilised to seek further adult education, suggesting that education policies did address modernisation and state control. Any changes that occurred had more to do with an increase in self-esteem and with the use of the information and communication technologies (ICT), as we shall see in the next section of this article. These were also public policy objectives, but they were not key goals.

Self-esteem raising and ICT learning

Current theories on RPL have stressed the learning and educational dimension of existing processes (in terms of philosophy and preferred methods) in many countries and practices. Reflection on experience and learning is a strong tool for developing an internal, learner-centred educational process, a significant stage for the powerful affirmation of the individual, resulting in a new sense of self-confidence and empowerment (Andersson & Harris, 2006; Harris et al., 2011). But in national policy documents, RPL was presented mainly as a way of accrediting learning attained throughout life without considering the educational dimensions of the process (Guimarães, 2011).

Respondents emphasised self-assessment that led to boosting self-esteem and self-confidence. Individual empowerment was referred to as another effect of RPL (Whittaker, Whittaker, & Cleary, 2006), even if this did not lead to learner emancipation (Barros, 2012, 2013). RPL also brought more responsibility and autonomy for those accredited, obvious too in professional contexts, according

to the representatives of companies where learners were working:

I found that RPL improved the self-esteem of these workers. They now feel they have taken another step forward – that they now have the 9th year and that they have gone up a level (...) Their self-esteem shows this and there is an apparent improvement.
(Company representative 01)

I get the impression that people become more responsible and more self-confident. RPL makes them more independent and more responsible. They are freer and more mature.
(Company representative 03)

Increased self-awareness was also detected, particularly in inter-relational skills, soft skills, acquired by adults, although at no time did any of this have an effect on career progress or wage increase. RPL contributed to learners 'climbing one more step up the social ladder', but this rise was subjective and unofficial and had no real impact on their professional lives. Increased social mobility was felt individually and symbolically. In addition, public policy and the more negative aspects of the final outcome of an adult education programme were far from achieving the many ambitious aims proposed.

Learners, adult educators and company representatives all attached less importance to learning as a whole, that is the cognitive and knowledge skills in the curriculum. Knowledge as a traditional, social and production process was therefore devalued. However, learners did mention learning that stemmed from computer and internet skills. Here 44.4% of respondents claimed that after completing the RPL process they sometimes used the computer to read, write, calculate, prepare reports, balance sheets, etc. while 20.2% did so often and 18.3% always. 36.1% claimed they used email, Facebook, etc. sometimes, but 22.7% never, while 19.8% said they used them often and 17.8% always. For the majority of respondents, the computer involved them in training sessions on how to use ICT in everyday life. The computer, and especially the Internet, became a new language, a 'window onto the world' (Salgado et al., 2011). They provided the opportunity to learn about other realities that learners would not otherwise have been able to access. This was a more effective means than more traditional forms of communication, such as telephone or postal channels, for contacting friends and relatives because they could send texts, images, etc. As a result, the computer turned out to be essential in increasing autonomy. In the past it had been necessary to ask such as colleague or relatives for help with work and tasks they were not able to accomplish on their own. According to respondents, daily habits changed after they had completed RPL, mainly through the use of the ICTs: *'The only change is that today I use the Internet more. I have started doing everything on the Internet. The whole thing was a motivation to use the Internet'* (Learner 08). Although the RPL process may have had limited impact on the professional progress of respondents, it did provide new ICT knowledge and skills for use in daily routine. But it is no less true that the process contributed decisively to boosting social and cultural inclusion,

through the use of ICT, a claim also defended by Amorim and Fragoso (2010). Most respondents reported that RPL had contributed to their personal development (81%). Individuals referred to an ‘internal change’ (Fragoso, 2007). They felt more secure in having a certificate. This would allow them in future to develop other career plans and continue their training. This brought ‘psychological empowerment’ (Barros, 2013). As this was something valued and appreciated by the adults who obtained accreditation, it was heavily underscored in what adult educators had to say:

Essentially the process for them means that what they were not able to do back then, they can do now. This makes it something personal, personal fulfillment, if you like, which is also important. Also, possibly to do with self-esteem, they may aspire to other job opportunities. (Adult educator 03)

According to Fragoso (2012), adults seeking RPL who had less schooling, on the whole, were in a vicious circle that was closing in on them: they had low self-esteem and little faith in their ability, missing out first on schooling and then training, without which they could not improve their employability and other aspects of civic, political, social and cultural life. But once adults participated more in learning activities in recent years they became more interested in formal and non-formal education and training, as demonstrated in studies done by the National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2009, 2013). Although not necessarily leading to significant learning, RPL did promote an appetite for continued learning, according to adult educators: *‘I think the adults are motivated to continue their training. Most adults complete the process with the intention of seeking further training (...)’* (Adult educator 02). In short, data showed tension between the goals of adult education policy and results obtained. RPL did not radically change the professional lives of learners, suggesting the key goal of the national strategy for adult education and EU guidelines had failed. However, other advantages not rated by human resources management guidelines were detected. The self-esteem of learners increased and they were motivated to join further education and training activities, an advantage in educational terms. Also, a taste for learning brought reconciliation with schooling, in that learners could only obtain the school certificate by successfully completing the RPL process, even if no real advantages were achieved.

Concluding remarks

In line with EU lifelong learning guidelines, Portugal’s national strategy for adult education included RPL as a key service and stressed its impact on the economy, employability and increased productivity, in harmony with human resources management guidelines. It did, however, undermine many other aspects. Although the goals of professional improvement and personal development are not incompatible in themselves, the national strategy in which RPL was central made it unlikely these goals would be well integrated. Data discussed in this paper have revealed

considerable tension² between economic progress and the professional advantages perceived by interviewees. Few, if any, changes in the professional status of accredited learners were detected. This suggests that if RPL did promote any change in economic and professional terms it was not easily apparent. Besides this, respondents put more emphasis on increased self-esteem and personal development—stressing the transformative dimension of RPL (Whittaker, Whittaker, & Cleary, 2006), as well as the use of ICT and the learning opportunity it provided.

The public policy developed between 2000 and 2011 seems to have failed to achieve some of its much-vaunted goals. However, this policy did have the effect of proving to learners what the advantage of education, training and learning were, and it also promoted participation, no mean achievements in applying the principles of modernisation, state control and democratic–emancipation in education policies. This is particularly important for a country where the adult population has a low schooling level. On the whole, the learners who completed the RPL process were not previously motivated to seek adult education and training (INE, 2009, 2013). This raises other questions on how to coordinate adult education policies and other policy approaches so as to increase the advantages for learners and promote social justice and social participation in general.

Although education policy goals may not have been achieved, significant gains were made in terms of educational and social participation, citizenship, justice and change (Harris et al., 2014). There may be other gains to be made from the social and educational involvement of adults with a low level of schooling in second-chance basic education or in other non-formal and informal education activities. These gains achieved by the national strategy for adult education will in the future require new policies and new services to support other policy approaches referred to in this article. This would provide continuity and maintain adult learner motivation and participation in adult education and training, within the wider context of adult education.

In this study learners were motivated to obtain a school certificate and engaged in processes geared to improving their personal, social and professional lives. Their hopes were raised after completing the RPL process and they began to see the advantages of lifelong education, training and learning. But interviewees were seldom naïve about the real possibilities of an immediate change to their economic status or of more encouraging results on the labour market. Consequently, the end notes to this article stress the importance of developing new policies and services for adult education (and associated opportunities) at a time of major upheaval and more emphasis placed on vocational training (more closely aligned with economic development). In times of long-term economic and financial crisis, promoting an individual learning strategy is never irrelevant (Dukevot, 2014), but we cannot be overoptimistic in addressing this strategy and it may even be unable to resolve structural problems.

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Notes

1. Recognition of prior learning is one of the terms of reference we use when referring to '(...) the practice of reviewing, assessing and acknowledging the knowledge and skills that adults have gained outside the formal education system' (Harris & Wihak, 2014, p. 13). Reflecting variations in practices, concepts, contexts and ideas (Andersson et al., 2013), this term is used in countries such as Australia, South Africa and Scotland. In the United Kingdom the reference is to prior experiential learning, prior learning assessment in the United States, prior learning assessment and recognition in Canada or recognition, validation and certification of competencies in Portugal (Harris et al., 2014). In this article, it is not our purpose to compare these terms. We use the term RPL to refer to a public service being developed in Portugal from 2000 to 2011.
2. Recently, government decision-makers took advantage of this tension. The lack of professional advantage was in fact the main reason advocated by a report that led to the suspension of RPL in 2012 (Lima, 2012). The national agency responsible for RPL development and other services was even replaced by a new department named the national agency for qualification and vocational teaching (*Agência Nacional para a Qualificação e Ensino Profissional*). It was argued that post-basic education could not afford to ignore work-related training. Changes in RPL were defended if they were more closely associated with work-related knowledge and the process was seen as a technology serving vocational training policies and the relevance of 'learning to compete' (Lima, 2012).

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