

Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education in Portugal: emerging practices and discourses from an empirical research

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ABSTRACT

In this communication we intend to present and discuss preliminary results from a work developed within a post-doc research entitled “Higher Education and Life long Learning: Recognition of prior learning and educational change”. This research work is being developed from a theoretical framework and from approaches to Education/training of adults.

Since the problem of recognition of prior experiential learning is very recent in the context of Higher Education in Portugal, we try to identify the emerging practices and reflect on the tendencies and the rationale of these processes.

At a first stage of the empirical work we performed an exploratory study – a questionnaire presented to the Portuguese public universities followed by a bibliographical analysis of political and legal documents. At a second stage of the research we interviewed post-graduate degree coordinators (masters) and from the analysis it seems possible to identify different rationales for the valorisation of prior learning in the context of higher education.

Considering that it is a complex phenomenon, we try to inter-cross these different levels of analysis in order to contribute to a more profound understanding of the recognition and validation processes of experiential prior learning in Portuguese Higher Education institutions.

1. EXPERIENTIAL PRIOR LEARNING IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

We try to understand how adult experience – experiential prior learning – is recognised and valued within the context of higher education institutions. Considering that this is an innovative educational research object, since the practices of recognition of prior learning are very recent in Portugal – particularly in Higher Education institutions –, it is not possible to analyze or compare it with other national studies.

We tried to approach the complexity of this educational phenomenon throughout a research developed at different levels and from different perspectives. That's why our global research project strategy was developed with different levels of analysis:

- from the political / legislative perspective, we wanted to identify how is the adult experience recognised, and what type of effects this recognition produces;
- from the institutional / organisational perspective, we were interested to know how do the institutions implement the new practices in their specific contexts;
- from the educational and pedagogical perspective, how is the adult experience recognised within the educational practices developed in specific academic contexts.

In this paper we will give an overview of the methodology and main results from the two previous levels, and we will focus on the third level of analysis: how adults experiential prior learning is valued from the educational and pedagogical perspective in specific academic contexts (master degrees offered by higher education institutions).

A) From a political legislative perspective we did an analysis of the recent legislation on the recognition of adult prior learning at the universities; in the beginning of 2006 the Portuguese government created a new law regarding the access to Higher Education (Universities and Polytechnics) that allows adult people to accede to H.E. without having the previous degree; adults can apply presenting a CV, a motivation letter, and have to do a special examination (theoretic or practical) made by the institution. Interviews are recommended. The focus of the evaluation process is to identify if the candidate has the capability to study at the H.E. level; the result of the process is the access to the H.E. studies and can also be the accreditation of the prior experiential learning (mainly from professional contexts).

B) From an institutional / organisational perspective, we developed a survey to the public universities focusing on the strategies developed by the institutions regarding lifelong learning, at the end of 2005 and beginning of 2006 – focusing on the recognition of adult prior learning, the continuous training offered by the institution, the adult learning practices, amongst other relevant topics. The sample was constituted by 15 public universities and we received answers from 12. At this time, only four institutions referred that had already developed some kind of practices of recognition; when asked if they are planning to implement these practices in the near future, half of the sample (six) said no.

In the year 2006/07 we made a content analysis of the specific legislation created by the universities (available in the websites), following the implementation of the law about the recognition of prior learning, aiming to characterize the object of recognition, the methodologies used and its effects (access without the previous degree, accreditation, advanced positioning,...); from the 16 institutions only 8 had put specific legislation on the web. The components of the evaluation were distributed between the theoretical or

practical examination and the evaluation of the curriculum and the motivations. However, they use mainly traditional practices of evaluation reproducing closely the traditional pedagogical model (grades, written examinations, disciplinary knowledge, and so).

2. RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING - DIFFERENT LEVELS, DIFFERENT MEANINGS

We can find out different practices for recognition of prior learning in different countries, different contexts and different levels. Previous studies (Pires, 2005) have shown the diversity of theoretical approaches, concepts, terminologies, methodologies, and so.

However, according to Harris (2006, p.1) recognition of prior learning “is one of a range of responses to the needs of adult learners in education and training. The key assumption is that adults have ‘prior learning’ which, subject to reflection, articulation and assessment, may be worthy of recognition and accreditation within formal education and training or workplaces contexts. Prior learning may have been acquired formally, non-formally and informally; the determining factor is that it is not currently (or fully) accredited. The outcomes of recognition can involve non-traditional access, the award of advance standing (or credit) within formal education and training or serve as a basis for an individually negotiated learning programme (as in work-based learning for example)”.

We consider that prior learning can be gained in different contexts and through different activities: informal and non-formal – acquired on work settings, leisure activities, through social and political activities, at home,... – and also formal – traditional courses or sessions, organised training situations; but in this case, this learning is already certified.

These core concepts can be defined as follows (Tissot, 2000; 2004):

- Formal learning occurs within an organised and structured context (formal education, in company training, ...). It may lead to a formal recognition (diploma or certificate);
- Non-formal learning is embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, but which contain an important learning element.
- Informal learning results from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure.

3. RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING - POSTGRADUATE DEGREES EXAMPLES

We wanted to understand what is the value given to the students experiential prior learning, how it is valued in the master degrees framework, and how the academic practices take it into account, particularly from the pedagogical perspective.

We tried to understand how the knowledge and competences acquired by the students in their professional, social and personal life are considered in the academic context, how is it valued from the institutional perspective and what is its relevance for formal learning.

We interviewed seven coordinators of masters degrees¹ in the four public Portuguese universities where the researchers of the team project were working:

- University of Aveiro,
- Faculty of Sciences and Technology (New University of Lisbon),
- Higher Institut of Economics and Management (Technical University of Lisbon),
- Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education (University of Lisbon).

The scientific areas of the masters degrees are:

- Sciences of Education (one general, one in Adult Education and other in Supervision)
- Engineering (one in Quality of Materials and other in Electronics and Communication)
- Management / MBA and Economics.

Within the framework of the project, we aimed to identify the reasons for the creation of these master's degrees, the most significant evolutions since they have been created, and, more specifically, to understand what are the main logics / rationales of valorisation the students experiential prior learning (professional experience, knowledge, competences,...) in the academic practices.

The interviews were developed with the following objectives:

- to get a global characterisation of the masters degrees;
- to get an appraisal of the effects of the degrees;
- to identify the profile of the students and their professional paths;
- to identify the research carried out by the institution;
- to identify the relationships established between the institution and other similar institutions (universities) and the relationships established with other types of institutions (enterprises, public sector, and so on).

Based on the qualitative content analysis of the interviews we identified three different types of valorisation of the students experiential prior learning, that are related to different pedagogical practices, different course organisation models, different orientation research projects, and different scientific areas.

We have named these different logics / rationales according to their main characteristics:

- Type 1 – a logic / rationale of non-valorisation of experiential prior learning
- Type 2 and 3 – two different logics / rationales of recognition / valorisation of experiential prior learning.

We present their main characteristics in the following table:

Table 1 - Valorisation of the students experiential prior learning

Main characteristics	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Dominant logic / rationale	Non-valorisation of the experiential prior learning	Experiential prior learning as a “foundation” for the curriculum choices	Experiential prior learning as a “resource” and a “potentiality”
Pedagogical practices	“Knowledge transmission” and “Remediation of lacks” Prior learning and interests are weakly or even not valued; Knowledge is transmitted / given by the teachers	“Knowledge foundation” Prior learning and interests are valued for the organisation of the curricula; knowledge is created from a common theoretical knowledge background	“Knowledge optimisation” Prior learning and interests are strongly valued for the construction of new knowledge; Knowledge is constructed from an empirical and theoretical confrontation
Course organisation	standardised traditional disciplinary	flexible traditional disciplinary	flexible interdisciplinary / trans-disciplinary
Research project	Mainly from the initiative of the teachers and from the interests of the departments.	Both from the initiative of the students and of the teachers.	Mainly from the initiative of the students articulated with their specific interests and professional contexts.
Scientific Area	Engineering	Economics and MBA	Sciences of Education

Type 1) Non-valorisation of experiential prior learning: “Knowledge Transmission” and “Remediation of lacks”

This logic / rationale was identified in the two masters of engineering created in the earlier 90's – Electronics and Communication (A) and Quality of Materials (B). These master degrees were created aiming to offer a specialized training both for people that pretend to develop a research career and for those who are already working in industry, and aiming to respond closer to the enterprises and industry needs. Master B was created with the support of Portuguese funds for the industry. Regarding the type of the masters students, in the master degree A the coordinator has referred that although in the beginning of the master students were young graduates, recently these students are a minority and that there is a relevant percentage of people who have two or three years of professional experience (still considered “young people”). This students are looking for professional and career recognition.

In the master degree B, the majority of students works in the industry and have several years of professional experience.

(A) “We teach what we know and what we think that at this level / area is the knowledge that is needed by the students.... We don't think that this can be discussed.... It's not the main paradigm.”

(B) “Our goal is not to value the knowledge that they already have. It is to complete the knowledge that they have got. We are not concerned with what they know (...).The program is already settled, the teachers are already chosen before acknowledging what people know. (...) when people apply they know already what is the program... and generally the programs respond to their lacks. So it is good for them.”

Type 2) Experiential prior learning as a “foundation” for the curriculum choices

We identified this logic / rationale in the masters degrees of Economics (C) and Management (D), created in the 80's.

In the master degree (D), students are mainly from the enterprises, they have 4/5 years of professional experience, and are generally graduates from different areas, such as economics, management, engineering. The coordinator refers to this people as “highly competitive”, and their aim is to be promoted in their professional career. Usually these students don't undertake the research project, instead of it they are focused on the courses, it is more professional oriented and less academic oriented (MBA). The course is flexibly organised and the students can chose the disciplines that they want to study.

The master degree C was designed to be more “generalist”, the academic component is very strong, and the students objectives are mainly in the academic and research area. Students in this master are generally people with 5 to 10 years of professional experience, sometimes less, but that are already working in enterprises or in different organisations.

(C) “What happens is that (the students) have different scientific backgrounds. We have here some basic disciplines, that do not belong to the formal curricula, are not compulsory... we offer them courses according to the area of their graduation (...) accountancy, informatics, and so. But our first semester tries to give them a more or less common background”.

(D) “That valorisation (prior learning) is always taken into account at the moment the student chooses the courses. They also choose in articulation with their own interests, but is mainly in the thesis research work that things are more evident, from the theoretical perspective but mainly from the professional point of view.”

Type 3) Experiential prior learning as a “resource” and a “potentiality”

The third logic, that values experiential prior learning as a powerful resource, was identified in the three master degrees in Sciences of Education, created in the earlier 90's. Two of these master degrees (Education and Development (E) and Adult Education (F) were originally designed aiming the development of the research, even though the professional development of the people were strongly related to it; these masters are mainly demanded by people with several years of professional experience, coming from different scientific domains and diverse professional contexts, not only related to the educational field. The third master found (G) within this logic (Pedagogic Supervision) was created with the aim to articulate research with professional development.

Students come from different scientific areas (health, education, vocational training, bank professionals, ...). The coordinators referred that they articulate the interests of the students with the themes worked in the courses and the research projects. They intend to optimise and create knowledge through the share of different experiences, the articulation between of theory and practice, the confrontation of the students empirical experience with theoretical knowledge, and the development of individual and collective research projects.

The two first master degrees are organised in flexible modules, not following a disciplinary approach. The development of the research project is usually the focus and the driver of the students academic work.

- (E) “We privilege people with experience, a public already adult. We don’t have a master degree that comes in the sequence of the graduate diploma, at that level, but we intend to value the learning potential and the knowledge that experience has given to people.” (...) It is a way of academic ratification of the knowledge acquired experientially. The academic context can identify, make explicit, formalise and contextualise that knowledge in a wider vision, making the experience dialogue with the research and theoretical knowledge about that questions.”
- (F) “We abolished disciplines, we have modules, project seminars, research seminars, thematic seminars, and so on ... We value the tutorial work, the pedagogy of the project. Considering the characteristics of the area of specialisation, we try to articulate the research projects with the professional activity of the students and the work that they carry on the field.” (...) “We have a strong concern regarding the profit that comes from the students diversity of experiences. We try to channel these experiences to the development of their research projects, and try to create, starting with these diversity of interests, a unifying research project”. (...).
- (G) “We try that they do academic works in different areas, in different professional fields. We pretend to cross different knowledge, to promote discussions.” (...) “we always start from the experience they have, from their life trajectory, and this is valid not only for the thesis, but also for the curricular part of the course. When a person decides for a theme, this has a lot to do with its trajectory and professional interests.” (...) in the curricular part of the master we have the concern to value the sharing of knowledge, the development of knowledge, the optimisation of knowledge. We try to use their own examples, from all the contexts.” (...). “Regarding the thesis, students propose the theme that they want to develop related to their own interests and professional context. Generally the empirical work is done in a context known by them.”

ADULT PERSPECTIVE ON EXPERIENTIAL PRIOR LEARNING

If we inter cross this types of valorisation of the experiential prior learning with the results of a survey on Lifelong Learning² centred on the study of the educational and professional trajectories of the post-graduates (from the four universities of the study), regarding how do people put in to perspective formal, informal and informal learning, we can identify some interesting findings.

² The survey is one of the methodological strategies developed by the research team, in the framework of project Telos II – Lifelong learning: evaluation of the effects on pos-graduate from the H.E.” The sample consists of 145 post-graduate students (128 masters and 27 PhD respondents) that finished their post-graduated studies in the academic year 1995/96 and 2000/2001 in the four Portuguese universities referred above.

Data shows that during the last twelve months people think they learned something relevant in different contexts and situations, mainly non formal and informal ones. The most significant learning context for the respondents is the work context. They recognise that they have learned not only during the work activity, “working” (86,7%), but also at the workplace, “talking to colleagues,...” (77,0%). Trans-national mobility is also a relevant source for learning, as 78,3% of the respondents think that they have learned “travelling, studying, working or living abroad”.

Social contacts and leisure activities are also valued significant for learning – “getting together with other people” (65,4%) and “leisure activities” (63,9%).

“Using local libraries, learning in resources centres, arts workshop nearby,...” (55,6%) and “staying at home” (52,3%) were also relevant situations for learning.

We stress that during the last twelve months the university was only valued as a learning context by 50,4% of the respondents. Equally the participation on training courses or sessions at the workplace (47%) or elsewhere (47,1%) doesn't seem to be as significant for the respondents.

Data shows that during the last twelve months non-formal and informal learning were more important for the respondents than formal learning. Data also shows that adults acknowledge the work setting as an important learning context.

However, people think that the best context to improve and update their professional competences is the formal context, where universities, colleges, training centres, play a key-role. This discrepancy can be due to the people's perception that the most valued learning (from the social and professional perspective) is the one that is obtained in an institutional and recognised education setting. The role of certification and the diploma social factor can be an important factor to take in to account.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have identified in this empirical study, H.E. institutions valorise experiential prior learning in different ways that can be related with different pedagogical models. The concepts of knowledge embedded in these models are also different, and belong to different epistemological paradigms.

Logics / rationales of valorisation of the students experiential prior learning

Main characteristics	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Dominant logic / rationale	Non-valorisation of the experiential prior learning	Experiential prior learning as a "foundation" for the curriculum choices	Experiential prior learning as a "resource" and a "potentiality"
Pedagogical practices	"Knowledge transmission" and "Remediation of lacks"	"Knowledge foundation"	"Knowledge optimisation"

The models for valorisation of adult experience in educational contexts have been changing with time, and we have witnessed the evolution of these models. However, in the traditional model of initial education and training, experience is taken into account in a peripheral way, in the organisation form and in the content of the curricula; in the context of the continuing education and training, professional experience is taken into account as the bases for future learning, generally defined by academic and scientific knowledge, and not by the content of that experience (Aubret and Gilbert, 2003).

According to Aubret and Gilbert (2003) in a innovative model of lifelong learning, experience can be defined as the core of the future development of the person, in continuity with the prior learning. This innovative model could be conceived integrating the functions of the two previous models (the model of the initial education and training and the model of the continuing education and training). Experience is learning, and its status should be valued and confronted with the academic knowledge.

As we pointed out previously, the non-formal and informal context (such as the work setting, in the national survey) was acknowledged as the most valued contexts for learning in the preceding year, by the respondents of the survey, post-graduates in H.E.

As we have analysed, H.E. institutions adopt different types of models to valorise learning gained from informal and non-formal contexts, establishing different relationships at the pedagogical level between informal and formal knowledge. These different academic pedagogical models reflect different conceptions of knowledge, and attribute different status to the experiential prior learning.

According to Peters (2006:163) "(recognition of prior learning) practices aim to open universities to a different type of student, to challenge the academy to look at different forms knowledge and to promote different assessment strategies".

Witnessing the changing role of Higher Education in a context of a Lifelong learning society, H.E. institutions should reflect on their strategies, models, and on their conceptions about knowledge and experience, in order to respond to the new demands from individuals and from the society.

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