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DIVERSE

Diversity Improvement as a Viable Enrichment Resource for Society and Economy



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In each country the Policy Brief should be written in accordance with the priorities emerging from the research and from the suggestions provided by the key actors involved in the process.

Policy Brief (2) WP4 - Lisbon, Portugal

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This project aims at exploring, in ten European regions, the barriers to recognizing the formal aspects of third country nationals' [TCN] skills, knowledge and competences [SKC], and the informal facets of diversity that can have a positive spillover into society. It assumes that formal, non-formal and informal SKC, if fully understood, can be put to good use both for migrants and their families, and for societies at large. The comparative perspective adopted allows furthermore information exchange between different European places and to build a learning network built on actual ongoing scholars and stakeholders' experiences.

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Ten organizations active in the cultural sector were used as a basis for the observation of these issues in Lisbon, five are profit organizations and five are non-profit; among the latter, one is public, and four other are voluntary organizations. All of them are located in Lisbon.

Compilation of all relevant information (legislation, reports, other relevant grey literature) and interviews with stakeholders (from selected public administrations, the trade unions, and other relevant agents) were carried out, in order to assess how the recognition and validation process of qualifications and competences is conducted, based on what references (which included assessing the EU influence), who were the partners in the process, what were the results achieved, and other relevant information.

In the end, ten TCNs working in the cultural sector were interviewed on their experience with Portuguese institutions and in terms of labour market integration. Specific attention was paid to the way they perceive the RVC institutional framework and process, the gains obtained from it, and the costs they incurred; they were also asked to compare it with the final results in terms of market integration.

A Social Audit Scheme as a development lever

Based on all the afore-mentioned inputs, a social audit scheme [SAS] was drawn (George & Ruivo 2015). Following Sen's (1999) capability approach, the SAS proposal is meant to stress RVC as a capability enabling people to better define working life objectives and to more actively participate both as producers and as citizens. In this sense, this audit views RVC not only as a technology to reduce or eliminate labour market mismatches, but also as a potential tool for promoting human rights and decreasing social inequality.

A rational but still not proactive enough RVC tool

Apparently, the existing mechanisms for recognizing and validating SKC are designed in a rational and optimizing way, potentially useful for both the candidates and their families, and the economy and the society at large. Yet, there is mounting evidence of mismatch, and that TCNs are, more than average citizens, exposed to discrimination. Anticipating such structural feature, the purpose stated in the project was to build a «shared multi-stakeholder audit scheme» aiming at bringing together all partners involved in the labour market and confronting them with the objective conditions faced by TCNs. This actually did not happen. Both in the seminars with the stakeholders and the awareness raising seminars, only participation from selected public institutions, some TCNs and some of their organizations, but scarce participation from trade unions and no participation at all from employers' associations was achieved.

One of the significant features of the Portuguese reality when it comes to the issue of SKC, which stands out in the reports, is the formal/informal dichotomy (with the general impression that, in

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Portugal, informality is very present in these procedures) (Marques, George & Ruivo 2014; George & Ruivo 2015). In the ten interviews conducted with TCNs, especially with regard to the professional recruitment procedures they went through, informality was reflected, on the side of institutions, in the reduced (or null) importance granted to certificates and a clear focus on professional experience described in the CV and elicited in job interviews; on the individuals' side, informality was reflected in the generalized lack of interest in obtaining and recognizing non-academic qualifications, as well as in the recognition of professional qualifications.

Apparently RVC has still a long way to go before it is part of the regular labour market operation in Portugal – at least concerning TCN recruitment and advancement. A much more proactive stance is required by national and local authorities on this.

Embedded but excessively autonomous institutions

Another aspect that caught our attention was the weak coordination between organizations. Simultaneously, the ten TCNs we interviewed attributed generally positive ratings to the action of Portuguese institutions (with some differences in intensity).

Peter Evans (1995) defined a developmental state as one that is simultaneously embedded in the relevant publics, and sufficiently autonomous not to be captured by special interests. The same approach can be applied to institutions (Portes & Marques 2015). The way we see it, in Portugal, institutions engaged in migration and RVC matters do manage to reach to their relevant publics, but the way they do it, in everyday, practical terms, is far from integrated. Apparently, each institution tries to do its best to service its relevant publics, but as the process is conceived as a system involving several agencies, when these articulations are not sufficiently worked out, there is actual possibility of blockage or of inefficiency in the process.

A staff with varied statuses

The legal and administrative framework in these areas has undergone constant changes, resulting in a permanent change of methodologies and requirements – many of them accompanied by new financial and infrastructural constraints. This requires an additional effort, by the different teams of counselling, routing and training, of interpretation of the reorientations and objectives set by those who design the new instruments of recognition, validation and certification.

Meanwhile, permanent and precarious statuses coexist in the personnel of RVC-related institutions. In the past five years, a freeze in hiring and promotions occurred in all public administrations; and, irrespective of personnel statuses, a salary reduction occurred. A significant share of the operational process of providing information, advice and training relies on public-private collaboration and partnerships, and on underpaid staff whose contractual situations are precarious, which causes the composition of teams to be constantly changing. These conditions undermine the quality of interface with TCNs, and the continuity of work, besides representing a waste in terms of accumulation of know-how.

Actionable levers

In this context, and as a complement to the SAS proposal, we hereafter suggest concrete actionable levers.

Before that, a full disclosure of our starting points is in order:

We assume that TCNs, as any other migrants, if affected by some sort of social need (poverty, no or scarce language proficiency, barriers to housing, etc.), should benefit from public services as any national citizen; social cohesion policies can make more resilient societies (Hall & Lamont 2013).

But TCNs, as any other migrants, are not to be viewed exclusively as welfare recipients; in fact, there is no evidence that most of them depend more than the average resident on public funds (Marques & Ciobanu 2011). Instead, TCNs should be perceived first and foremost as producers, innovators, and citizens. And as such, their skills, knowledge and competences, if fully recognized and explored, could be put to good use, for them and society.

Finally, we admit that diversity in the work place can, if specific conditions are met, boost the learning and innovative processes, through the exchange of experiences acquired in different contexts, including learning how to build bridges across cultural differences, which is crucial for economic processes in the context of globalization (Hofstede 1980).

The actionable levers based on the study are as follows:

1. Regular data production and collection on migrants' skills, knowledge and competences' recognition, validation and certification should be included in the regular official statistical tools – and channelled to the recently created “Monitoring Immigrants' Integration in Portugal” tool. This should include both formal and informal SKC, and both the local and the national scales. This would allow independent evaluation of the training programmes and actions - indispensable for assessing and calibrating public policies.
2. Recognition and validation of competences requires building a shared understanding on what skills, knowledge and competences are (or should be). It entails therefore a multistakeholder commitment, involving workers and their organizations, employers and their organizations, professional bodies, and public institutions, to do it. This involves creating appropriate incentives and disincentives to have proactive agencies, willing to working together; a motivated and duly recognized staff is also an important condition.
3. Recognition and validation of competences also has to be fully recognized as a tool for economic improvement - although with an important social impact. This entails building a shared understanding on the fact that recognizing and validating migrants' SKC can help regulating the labour market (easing mobility inside the EU, decreasing qualification mismatch). Given the present global competition for talents (also inside the EU), recognition and validation of competences can also help turning the labour market more flexible (easing mobility inside the country, the EU, between sectors of activity, etc.). Regulation and flexibility do not have to be contradictory processes. This requires routine multistakeholder coordination, with democratic decision-making procedures – and the afore-mentioned

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requirements. (This also requires both good data, widely accessible to the public, and proactivity from local, national and European agencies.)

4. Recognition and validation of competences also has an important social and human impact (in personal self-esteem, social well-being, and social cohesion). An audit to assess the benefits and the flaws of RVC processes should also collect data on the ways these processes spill over into objective and subjective well-being of migrants involved in such programmes and actions.

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