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RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN PORTUGAL. CONTEXT – ORIGIN – PRACTICES

Recognition of Prior Learning as a Change

Under the act of 11 July 2014: Amending the Act – “Law on Higher Education and other laws”¹ the possibility to recognize prior learning (RPL) has been introduced into the Polish higher education institutions. This possibility poses a change anticipated for a relative long time by both, adult education research community where the importance of non-formal and informal learning to individuals and societies’ developments is being stressed² as well at the politics level (both, national and international) where the role of university in lifelong learning is being highlighted³. The concept of *Lifelong Learning University* refers to the so called third mission of university (cooperation with the socio-economic environments) that should be fulfilled parallelly to the research and teaching. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is based on the assumption of trying to integrate *this* what is “formal and systemic” with *this* what is “individual, non-formal and often personal” (biography, educational and vocational experience). Simultaneously, Polish legislator has limited the relationships between university and lifelong learning with reducing RPL possibility to the procedure that can be used in the students enrolment only. As a result, RPL makes up a change in the Polish higher education. However, from the adult education research perspective, the universities’ possibilities of promoting non-formal and informal learning have only been partly utilized in the law.

Many researchers from the field of organizations and management⁴ stress the fact that each change in organization is a source of anxiety and uncertainty⁵. It also happens with RPL procedure in Poland. This tendency can be noticed if we conduct e.g. *desk*

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¹ *Ustawa z dnia 11 lipca 2014 r. o zmianie ustawy – Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym oraz niektórych innych ustaw*, Dz.U. z 2014 r. poz. 1198.

² It is impossible to refer here to the whole discourse in the field of andragogy. I appeal therefore to the so-called ‘common knowledge’ of the scientific community.

³ See. A. Matusiak, *Uznawanie kwalifikacji w kontekście uczenia się przez całe życie. Ustalenia – doświadczenia – dylematy*, „Dyskursy Młodych Andragogów” 2014, t. 15, s. 63-74 and others.

⁴ M. Sobka, *Zmiany organizacyjne w teorii i praktyce*, Lublin 2014.

⁵ E. Maksymowska, *O czym warto pamiętać wprowadzając znaczącą zmianę w zarządzanej placówce*, ORE, available at: https://doskonaleniawięci.pl/Upload/Artykuly/2_1/o%20czym%20warto%20pamita%20wprowadzajac%20zmiane_e.maksymowska_1.pdf [4.01.2016].

research – there are many questions related to organizational issues as well the peculiar apprehension of the role and ethos of Academia is noticeable⁶.

Searching for the answer to the question of how people deal with the situation of change can be one of the ways of dealing with such a situation⁷. On the macro and mezzo social levels, seeking answers to such question is supported by, among others, principle of sharing “the best practices” that is widespread in the European Union through e.g. providing financial support for projects aimed at sharing knowledge and experiences. University of Lower Silesia is a leader of one of these projects entitled *Promoting LLL in HE by implementing innovative practices in RPL (EDUPRO)*⁸. The project is implemented under the ERASMUS + Programme, Key Action 2, Strategic Partnership for Higher Education. It is aimed, firstly, at conducting research at University of Algarve in Portugal⁹ and University of Warwick in the UK¹⁰ so that to find the answers to the questions related to the RPL practices organization at these universities. Secondly, it is aimed at implementation of innovative practices related to RPL at the University of Gdańsk (Poland) and University of Lower Silesia (Poland). Aforementioned universities are the partners in the project. The project will last until September 2016.

The aim of this paper is to present the results of research conducted in the one of the project phases. As I mentioned before, the research was conducted in Portugal and UK in March and April 2015. There is a long tradition of RPL practices in both countries, and this was, inter alia, one of the reasons for choosing these countries as a places for research. On one side, the research was aimed at knowing the RPL practices, on the other one, at elaborating the institutions profiles. We selected research methods such as: interviews (semi structured; with both, academics and students; individual and group interviews) as well documents analysis (including documents prepared by the partners, such as RPL practices descriptions). In this paper I make use of the practices descriptions and institutions profiles created at University of Algarve, but the analysis is also expanded by literature analysis. If this is necessary, I also make use of interview transcripts to illustrate some conclusions/theses. However, the aim of this paper is not to provide all of the research results presentation¹¹. Its aim is rather to draw attention

⁶ A. Wroczynska, *Organizacja w uczelni procesu potwierdzania efektów uczenia się*, available at: https://www.nauka.gov.pl/g2/oryginal/2015_05/d7c7e8554c72e52b9df3c2e007a03062.pdf [10.01.2016].

⁷ J. Kłodkowska, *Radzenie sobie pracowników ze zmianami w organizacji*, Wrocław 2014.

⁸ ERASMUS + Programme, Key Action 2, Strategic Partnership for Higher Education; Project No: 2014-1-PL01-KA203-003629, ULS – leader (E. Kurantowicz, A. Nizińska, A. Bilon), University of Algarve (A. Fragoso, S. Valadas, J. Arco), University of Warwick (B. Merrill, W. Curtis, S. Revers) University of Gdańsk (M. Mendel, R. Suska, M. Zieliński).

⁹ Research conducted by research team from University of Lower Silesia.

¹⁰ Research conducted by research team from University of Gdańsk.

¹¹ Such presentations make up a project documentation.

to both, the contextuality of RPL practices in Portugal as well the multiplicity of forms and solutions used in RPL processes. The research reports are available at the project website: www.edupro.dsw.edu.pl. The goals aforementioned determine the structure of the paper.

Social and political contexts of RPL practices emergence in Portugal

The analysis of institutions profiles created in the EDUPRO project allows us to come to the seemingly trivial conclusion on RPL contexts importance. Despite the fact that nowadays globalization (cultural, economic and political) and concept (and politics) of LLL unify – to some extent – the conditions/circumstances in which RPL has become not only the possibility but also the necessity¹², contexts seem to have a crucial impact on RPL course and development. As research conducted by the project partners has shown, contexts (historical, cultural, social, political and economic) are gaining importance since they allow us not only to assess changes in higher education introduced by RPL implementation in various countries but also – to some extent – to indicate the development courses in Polish RPL practices. Furthermore, RPL contexts allow us to understand more clearly the significance assigned to this practice and its social role. In addition, it is worth noting, that RPL itself is geared up for contexts – individuality and biography of person participating in the process. In this sense, one could talk about the “double importance of contexts”: RPL process (or procedure) is embedded within the context and geared up for contexts. In this paper, the context referring to the first of these meanings is of special interest to me. I focus on presentation of contexts in which Portuguese RPL practices were implemented as well on the indication of differences that can be noticed in comparison to Polish contexts.

One of the main purposes assigned to RPL practices in Portugal was the battle against illiteracy broadly understood, and, therefore, the struggle to increase the educational attainments among Portuguese population. This purpose had had its own specific historical and social basis comparing to other European countries – in Portugal, even in the ‘70s, the level of illiteracy among people aged 20+ had amounted to approx. 32.5%¹³, and although it formally dropped to 5.2% in 2011, there are regions and localities where it still goes on about 19.9%¹⁴. The debates on enabling people to recognize their own knowledge, skills and competences had started in the ‘70s, although for economic and

¹² Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, Official Journal of the European Union, Vol. 55, 22 December 2012.

¹³ K. Oglesby, A. Krajnc, M. Mbilinyi, *Adult Education for Women*, [in:] *Lifelong Education for Adults. An International Handbook*, ed. C.J. Titmus, Oxford, 1989, p. 329.

¹⁴ J.P. Vestia da Silva, C.C. Vieira, *The value of informal learning for illiterate older women across the lifespan. Perceptions of Elderly Women from a Rural Region of Portugal*, [in:] *Private world(s)*.

political reasons this possibility was implemented in the '90s and reformed in 2013. Earlier, in 2006 together with the Bologna Process implementation, RPL possibility has been established for HE level¹⁵.

It is worth noting that this peculiar context related to illiteracy caused the situation in which RPL was massified, mainly on the lower levels of education system. In HE institutions RPL has been dedicated mainly to the *non-traditional students*. It is aimed at widening access to HE, facilitating the higher education flexibility, and fostering HE perspicuity (before the Bologna Processes implementation the duration of particular study programme could differ significantly, e.g. some courses lasted 5 years being still a first cycle of higher education and ending with bachelor degree)¹⁶. Therefore, various possibilities of beginning education at HE level have been established for various candidates/students, which will be described later. As a result, in Portugal, there are students whose almost entire educational path proceeded through RPL. During one of the interviews one student described and assessed this possibility using such words:

[...] *I was stop studying when I was 17, really young and I didn't finished my secondary degree and then a 4 years ago I decided, 'no, you have to change your life' and I applied to New Opportunities center. And in this project they gave me credits for all my experience and I completed my secondary education. I wanted earlier but I didn't match to the school [...] It was beautiful because you have to fight for the better life. And you see the whole experience of your life, like meeting people, travelling, like other language, like this a little bit or that or no matter – you have a credits for all, so it was really good.*

However, the massified RPL, as I mentioned before, has had its own negative consequences, especially in HE. In the interviews collected by project researchers the political scandal that appeared as a consequence of recognizing all learning outcomes and providing diploma of higher education for one of the public persons has been stressed. Therefore, as the director of education programme highlighted:

[...] *nowadays law is more restricted than it was before, because we had some political scandals... one or two... the Ministry has restricted the rules and we have to be really careful about this.*

Since RPL is one of the elements of educational policy, it is dependent largely on economic context. In Portugal this context has a double importance – on one side it is related to the system organization and educational expenditures, on the other hand it affects the potential candidates for RPL procedure. Despite the fact that RPL does not cost a lot of money, the diminishing interest in studying itself is noticeable in this

Gender and Informal Learning of Adults, eds. J. Ostrouch-Kamińska, C.C. Vieira, Rotterdam, Boston, Taipei, 2015, p. 62.

¹⁵ EDUPRO internal materials in: A. Melo, A. Benavente, *Educação Popular em Portugal (1974-1976)*, Lisboa 1978.

¹⁶ EDUPRO internal materials prepared at University of Algarve.

country. One of the faculty authorities member at the University of Algarve described economic issues in such words:

[...] *I have noticed that there has been a decrease in the applicants number. This may have a many different causes but one of them is definitely the economic issue. Here in Portugal we face serious economic crisis. Official statistics say that the unemployment rate is about 15% but I would say that unofficially is about 25%. About 25% is out of the job and even 40% young people are out of the job, even those who have the degree. The other thing that prevent people from applying is the fees. Fees are extremely expensive here in Portugal. A few years ago Portugal was one of the 4 countries with the highest fees in Europe. For unemployed people it's impossible to study.*

From the systemic point of view, political and economic contexts have had a great impact not only on the debate focused on the moment of establishing RPL practices (delayed for many years) but also the development of RPL institutions. For economic and political reasons, as it was stressed by project partners, the Portuguese government decided to close RPL institutions in 2011, exactly in the moment of their great rise. Then, these institutions have been transformed into similar ones and having almost the same aims and tasks. When these reforms took place, in Portugal, there was a vivid debate on the role of RPL institutions and on the fact that they almost replaced the formal education system. The newly established centres – CQEP (Centres for Qualifications and Professional Training) have been operating since 2014¹⁷, and, as it was stressed by people working there, the role and financial conditions of these institutions are still not so clear.

The data and conclusions aforementioned were presented to stress two important issues:

– From the macrosocial perspective, RPL has its own social aims and tasks. While in Portugal the RPL implementation was strongly related to its socio-educational context (high illiteracy rate), in Poland, as it seems, the need for RPL implementation is rather an effect of global (European) policy and is aimed at facilitating social mobility. Polish net enrolment rate in tertiary education being still high¹⁸ allows us – perhaps – to predict that RPL procedure will not be massified in this country. This can change if the tendency towards decreasing of net enrollment rate will be still noticeable¹⁹ and educational activity (in both, non-formal and informal education) of adults rate will continue its growth²⁰. It is not without significance that changes within labour market,

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

¹⁸ *Szkolnictwo Wyższe w Polsce 2013*, Ministerstwo Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego, available at: https://www.nauka.gov.pl/g2/oryginal/2013_07/0695136d37bd577c8ab03acc5c59a1f6.pdf [3.01.2016].

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

²⁰ *Kształcenie dorosłych 2011*, GUS, Departament Badań Społecznych i Warunków Życia, available at: http://stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/ED_ksztalcenie_doroslych_2011.pdf [3.01.2016].

the highlighted need for retraining as well the workforce migration within EU may also, of course, change the role of RPL in Poland.

– In case of Portugal, it was the social context that focused RPL development on the lower levels of education. CQEP centres visited during EDUPRO project have had a great number of RPL tools and methods well-developed. The possibility for continuing education was also established in these centres (e.g. vocational training for disabled people). Comparing to lower education levels, the RPL procedures at universities seemed to be easier, and, to a greater extent, based on trust in academic staff's capacity to recognize candidate's knowledge, skills and competences.

Variety of RPL forms and methods at University of Algarve

In this part of the paper I focus on presenting RPL practices as a complex process in which many agents are involved. Portugal makes up an example of countries where it is assumed that various candidates for studying should have different access and enrolment paths. Nevertheless, there are some common elements within the procedures devoted to them, e.g. necessity for preparing portfolio/CV²¹.

One of the most important differences between Portuguese and Polish RPL procedures is the fact that in Portugal, people who have not graduated in secondary degree are allowed to study. This group of candidates can begin university studies throughout using so called *M23 procedure* being devoted to the people aged 23 or over. However, these people are obligated to pass the exam – writing test consisting of two components: language competences and general cultural knowledge and skills assessment (Portuguese language and culture) as well the general knowledge on the subject that people are going to study (e.g. sociology, in case of social sciences) assessment. So that to further this obligation, the vast majority of universities offer preparing courses. One of our interviewees explained to us:

[...] we have preparing courses for the examinations. They have attended preparation courses, for example in sociology, biology. These courses have a duration of 60 hours and if they are successful in completing the course they are allowed to seek for not to undergo the exams. But they have to pay for the course. The general fee covers the whole process. Each preparation course have a different fee between 150 and 180 Euros. Here we have sociology preparation course and it costs 100 Euros so it's not so expensive.

In the further stages of *M23 procedure*, the analysis and assessment of candidate's vocational experience (CV analysis) and individual interviews are conducted²².

²¹ Decree-Law no 64/2006 (21st of March 2006); Diário da República, 2.ª série – N.º 239 – 11 de dezembro de 2014 Regulamento n.º 546/2014.

²² EDUPRO internal materials prepared at University of Algarve.

For candidates who graduated in the first cycle of studies before the implementation of Bologna Process (having pre-Bologna degrees) the separated path has been established. These candidates have to apply to a master programme in the same disciplinary field. The creditation committee (usually consisting of 3 members) evaluates their professional experience and decide if they are excused from the first year of the master programme (but there is a maximum of 20 ECTS credits that the committee can decide students should take).

In this procedure, first, applicants should contact with the University and have an individual meeting/interview with the professor/academic teacher/specialist of the chosen study programme. An applicant presents CV and describes his/her professional experiences, achievements during this meeting. Then, as a second step, an applicant with the support of the professor creates *portfolio* which is based on biographical approach (Curriculum of life histories). The fact that this path of beginning higher education is mostly based on biographical methods seems to be crucial. A particular attention is also paid to the scientific character of vocational experience analysis. Therefore, the candidates are supposed to make use of academic literature etc. The aim of the portfolio prepared in this way is, on the one hand, to facilitate the resumption of academic thinking, on the other hand, to organize (and order) thinking of vocational experience.

Another group for which RPL elements are designed and used is an academic staff. According to Portuguese law, each university, especially polytechnics, should employ the *specialists*. Therefore, their vocational experience and learning are recognized by committees consisting usually of 6 members. Even if candidates have a doctoral degree, they have to present both, their CVs as well as the projects in which they analyse their professional lives and experiences and/or resolve particular problem within their disciplinary field. The two-partial exam can last from 4 to 6 hours. It is worth noting that once the candidate received the *specialist* title and he/she is acknowledged in the practitioners communities (for instance, trade associations), it is possible to exempt his/her from the exam. Nevertheless, this group of academic teachers is obligated to continue their professional activities outside the universities. *Specialists* have usually a part-time employment at the universities²³.

The aforementioned forms of RPL have been presented to stress that RPL itself can fulfill various roles and suit different social groups. Portuguese RPL forms are the result of social contexts described in the first part of the paper, including the legal context.

Nevertheless, as our research has shown, the RPL complexity does not lie only in its social roles. To a large extent, this complexity is a result of RPL character and the fact that RPL is a particular “meeting” between formal education and individual and

²³ *Ibidem*.

personal life experiences, as I mentioned earlier. In Portugal, during this peculiar meeting the trust in committee's competencies is of particular importance. One of the committee members stressed clearly that:

[...] the students are normally very nervous because we have bear in mind that they abandoned the formal education a long time ago, so they are not used to this academic world [...] for them it is a kind of an oppressive world. So sometimes we have really stressed people sitting in front of us so the first thing we are trying to do is to make them relaxed.

As we can see, RPL can be associated with various emotions, sometimes the difficult ones. This pertains to RPL candidates especially and was confirmed in the interviews with them. Some of students stressed that:

[...] the most stressful moment for me was the exam and the interview.

The tasks that are assigned to committee members were described as follows:

[...] we try to disclose the potential.. we try to find the strong connections. Sometimes these connections are evident. Other times are not so evident. We value the experiences which the candidates themselves may not value.

In this context, the issue of tools used in RPL process could appear and be on special importance. While on the earlier stages of education the complex tools for knowledge, competences and skills assessment have been elaborated, in higher education portfolio and interviews are mainly used (especially in *M23 procedure*) and motivation for studying is assessed. However, it should be stressed once again, that one of the main aims of RPL in Portugal is to widen an access to higher education, and in most cases, RPL does not result in excuse from particular academic courses. Such legal solution causes the situation in which RPL committees usually focus on educational motivation, language and academic discourse assessment etc. In practice, as interviewees have indicated, the excuse from some courses conditioned by great vocational experience is possible but – what is interesting – most of the students usually decide to participate in the courses even if they are excused. They perceive these courses as very useful for their practice (vocational lives), namely as courses that allow them to analyse their own practice, methods, tools and ways of acting in particular situations. One of the academic teachers described this situation:

[...] even if they have the recognition they come to the classes because they consider that often... ok. They had piano, guitar etc. but it does not applied to the social field. So they come. Either they do not apply at all, or they come to the classes. Because in this course I don't teach to play a piano. I teach how to use it for social interventions. And this is what they want to learn from me.

While analyzing various forms of RPL processes in Portugal, it is worth considering the evaluation of RPL – how it is being assessed and what are the results of RPL

implementation. The academic teachers have mostly stressed the benefits of including older and mature students in formal higher education that are as follows:

- the benefits for students themselves – personal growth and development, improvement of vocational and financial position (acquiring or change in employment), an increase in reflexivity etc. This increase in reflexivity is also stimulated by the rule of self-directed learning, namely it is a student who decides on which courses/knowledge/skills he/she applies to be recognized. One of the academic teachers stressed:

[...] student needs to know what they want to recognize. That's the insure that they know their profile.

- the benefits related to the learning process of all students group – it has been highlighted that students who made use of RPL procedure contribute to group's learning by introducing more mature and reflexive attitudes towards learning and work life,
- the benefits related to facilitating the academics' work:

[...] these students are more interesting to work with. We can have some more interesting conversation. They are more mature.

Nevertheless, some of the RPL forms are criticized in Portugal, especially the M23 procedure. This criticism has been described in these words:

[...] Many people criticize this way of entrance to the university because they call it easy way: "why the other students have to take this whole difficult processes of exams. For the M23 it easier, it's quite easy: you have to do some examination, some interview and that's it".

Particular criticism was addressed to RPL procedures during the debate based on scandal mentioned in the first part of the paper. As a result of this scandal RPL is being used more and more carefully in the entire country. In our research, many people stressed the uncertain future of attitudes towards RPL procedures.

Conclusions

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), as our research has shown, is dependent deeply on historical, social, and educational contexts, and fulfills many social roles. It seems like implementation of RPL procedures in Portugal was a "grassroots initiative" (in a global context) and designed to fulfill its own social role. This role was supposed to be reduced gradually since the aims would be achieved²⁴. In Polish context, RPL makes up a response to different social needs that were mentioned before (namely, facilitating

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

social and vocational mobility, and adjusting educational policy to the EU and labour market's requirements). The Polish legislator has reduced the risk of scandals similar to the Portuguese scandals with introduction of limits on the amount of ECTS points that can be recognized in RPL procedure. Taking into account the Polish social and educational contexts one could state, that it is possible that in Poland, RPL procedure will not be massified even though it is popularised in mass media as a procedure that "makes studies shorter". As the experiences gathered in the project have shown, RPL is a complex and time-consuming process that cannot be reduced to the administrative procedures themselves.