

# Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences: Complexity and new professional activities

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**ABSTRACT:**

This paper was written based on information collected in three Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences Centres (RVCCC). The work carried out at the RVCCC involves the assessment of competences obtained through life experiences. The recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC) is a complex and difficult task, both for the adults and the professionals involved, owing to a range of factors. In this text, the option was made to focus the problem on the complexity inherent to the aspects underpinning the process — the competences, the life experience and the assessment. The following questions provide the framework for the problems tackled and reflected on throughout the paper: What is the nature of the data associated with the recognition and validation and which make this process complex? What professions arise out of the work carried out by the RVCC? The RVCC teams use a set of strategies (e.g. hybrid methodological model, monitoring of the adult, triangulation of the information) to get round the complexity, tensions and difficulties engendered by the RVCC process. The quality and fairness of the process depends largely on the supervision and professionalism of the teams that work in the Centres.

**KEYWORDS:**

Adult education, recognition, validation and certification of competences, profile of the RVC professional, experiential learning.

## INTRODUCTION

The research behind this paper<sup>1</sup> is part of a Doctorate project in Educational Sciences — Adult Education, the goal of which is to understand the ideas behind the training available for adults who have a low level of schooling and what the adults think of these training opportunities. This text is restricted solely to the field of the aforementioned study, the process of recognition, validation and certification of competences and is based on a set of empirical data collected in three Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences Centres<sup>2</sup> (RVCCC), which began operating in Portugal in 2001. The empirical data consisted of semi-directive interviews given to the teams of the 3 Centres (a total of 8 interviews with RVC professionals, 7 interviews with RVC trainers and 3 interviews with coordinators) and some certified adults (14 interviews to adults). Through recognition of competences these Centres allow academic certification to be awarded to individuals over 18 years old who did not complete the 9<sup>th</sup> year of schooling. The certificates<sup>3</sup> awarded are entitled B1 (4<sup>th</sup> school year), B2 (6<sup>th</sup> school year) and B3 (9<sup>th</sup> school year). The decision regarding which school level to award depends essentially on two factors: the level of schooling that the adult possesses when starting at the Centre, and the competences he/she manages to show during the various phases of the process. The Centres aim to recognise, validate and certify the competences of adults who have a low level of schooling, which they have acquired

throughout their lives in different contexts (family, social life, work and school/work training).

The forming of the problem and the reflection carried out in the paper are guided by the following issues: What is the nature of the data associated with the recognition and validation of competences and which makes this process complex? What professions arise out of the work carried out in the RVCCC? What professions are radically changed in the context of the RVCCC work? What impact does the process of recognition and validation of competences of adults with a low level of schooling have on the functions and attitudes of the staff at the Centres? The text is organised into two sections: the first analyses the nature of the aspects inherent to the RVCC process — the competences, the life experience and the assessment, and the second involves systematisation of and reflection on the functions and competences of the RVC professional and the RVC trainer.

## ASSUMPTIONS AND DIFFICULTIES INHERENT TO THE PROCESS OF RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION OF COMPETENCES

Analysis of the RVCCC is based on the assumption that there is continuity between learning and experience, and that learning processes are independent from the accumulation of experiences, therefore making it pertinent to recognise and validate the learning acquired by adults with a low level of

schooling throughout their lives, giving this knowledge visibility through certification. It is acknowledged that learning results from the need to respond to the challenges and unforeseen events that life throws up, as “a non-transferable right that each person has to survive” (Gronemeyer, 1989, p. 81), and as such learning takes place throughout life and in several contexts, in informal, non-formal and formal ways. The adults that subject themselves to RVCC are viewed as individuals who have a unique life experience, which is their main resource in undertaking the process. A “positive reading” is taken, whereby the intention is to identify and value what the person has learned throughout life. In this RVCC process education is understood as a continuous process in time and space and a “production of the self, by the self”, in which the individual “uses him/herself as a resource” (Charlot, 1997, *cit. in* Canário, 2000, p. 133). In the RVCC under analysis, the teams recognise the centrality of the subject in the learning process, and carry out their task from the “perspective of production of knowledge that is situated at the diametric opposite of the cumulative, molecular and transmissive conception of traditional schooling” (Canário, 2000, p. 133). These assumptions have profound implications on the organisation of the device, methodologies, tools and functions and the attitude of the actors involved.

The complex character of the aspects inherent to the recognition, validation and certification of competences — the competences, the life experience and the assessment — is at the heart of most of the difficulties and challenges faced by the teams responsible for the process in the RVCC. The process of recognition and validation of competences is complex and difficult both for the adult involved and for the teams of the Centres. One of the reasons for this complexity and difficulty results from the very nature of the object under analysis — competences. A competence refers to the ability to call on, in a given context, a set of knowledge situated at the level of knowledge, know-how and know-how-to-be to solve problems. Competences do not exist *per se*; they are linked to a concrete action and associated with a specific context. As stated by Sandra Bellier (2001, p. 254) “a competence is not what one does but how one does it satisfactorily. It is therefore

what underlies the action and not the action itself.” The fact that the competence is based on an action, a context and specific processes, raises problems in assessing competences in the Centres under analysis, for a start because the recognition and validation is deferred in time. In other words, the individual is not assessed at the moment he/she shows a certain competence but rather *a posteriori*. The teams face difficulties in capturing competences of individuals on a daily basis; in an attempt to overcome these difficulties they focus on the process of self-assessment and opt for the triangulation of information, using several sources (e.g. evidence from life path, observations, analysis of the dossier and tasks carried out by the adult during the process), several tools (e.g. demonstration exercises, mediation tools, problem-situations) and teamwork. Nevertheless, they are aware that the task of recognition and validation of competences will never be perfect. Despite their efforts there will inevitably be cases of overestimation and underestimation of competences.

Identification of competences takes place essentially through the collection of data about the life experience of adults with little schooling, which constitutes another facet of the difficulty and complexity of the RVCC process. The concept of experience is imprecise, encompassing a wide range of meanings. Experience is a dynamic quality; it is brought into question and modified in line with new situations experienced, which enables the evolution of the individual, making it a never-ending process, which results in a process of lifelong learning. The amplitude of the concept of experience results from the fact that experience “is confused with the presence of the subject in the world, leading to permanent interactions with the environment and the self; even non-facts, non-actions and non-communications are experiences” (Vermersch, 1991, p. 275). One must also take into account that “not all experience results necessarily in learning, but experience constitutes potential for learning” (Dominicé, 1989, p. 62). Ascertaining whether non-conscious learning took place or, in contrast, the experience did not lead to any kind of learning, is a very difficult and time-consuming task, both for the adult and for the teams. To overcome this difficulty the teams use descriptive forms, asking for the description of events in an attempt to facilitate access

to the sequence of actions and learning, achieved to subsequently gauge competences of the adult.

Assessment always involves a judgement that results from comparing an existing situation and a desirable situation. In this case the existing situation is the life path of the adults and competences that they show (indicators), and the desirable situation is the key benchmark competences (comparison criteria). Assessment is a complex process, and when dealing with the assessment of competences even more so, which therefore constitutes a difficulty in the RVCC process. Analysis of the assessment of competences carried out in the Centres allows us to reflect on a set of new challenges that arise. By studying the competence assessment processes at the RVCCC, an opportunity is created to review and rethink the assessment practices, namely those used in formal educational environments. The competence is assessed in the RVCC from a humanist perspective and not simply “to judge” (Cardinet, 1989, cit. in Paquay, 2000, p. 122) competences shown by the adult, but also to give meaning and value to the life path, the experience, the adult himself/herself as a person. Although the main aim of the Centres’ teams is to clearly ascertain competences of the adult and compare them to the benchmark competences, so as to assess the possibility and the degree of certification, the work methodology and the tools used allow the process to be carried out in a perspective of an encouragement and humanist assessment, with potential to raise awareness.

The process of recognition and validation of competences in the RVCCC is aimed at “making visible” (Liétard, 1999) competences that adults with little schooling have but which, in most cases, they do not know about, ignore or think little of; which involves a complex and meticulous process of assessment of competences based on life experience. The recognition is underpinned by a facet of self-assessment, which occurs when the adult analyses his/her competences, and a facet of hetero-assessment, when the Centres’ team members compare the adult’s competences with the benchmark competences. The recognition is not confined to a description of one’s life experience. It involves remembrance, selection and analysis of information, implies above all a rigorous process

of reflection and distancing from lived events. The dynamics that arise in the course of the recognition process demand a deep inner search by the adult and interferes with his/her “I”, involving cognitive and emotive mechanisms. The adult, in order to answer the questions “What has my life path been in its professional, family, social and education/vocational training aspects? What competences have I gained throughout my life? Where have I used them?” must inevitably ask the question “Why am I what I am?”

The recognition and validation of competences through the analysis of an adult’s life path involves a process of assessment that raises very delicate questions. Individuals may feel they are being assessed as a person, or that their life path is being judged. As Paquay states (2000, p. 121) “from the moment a competence is being judged, the subjects are necessarily implicated. It is the group of their cognitive, affective and motor resources that are taken into account, and they feel like they are being thoroughly judged, in person and in their identity. If the judgement is negative, without doubt it will quickly have disastrous effects”. How can one get round this difficulty in the RVCC process? The teams of the Centres under analysis overcome this problem by adopting several strategies: first, they try to identify at the moment of registration or in the first recognition sessions the people that are not likely to have the suitable profile to carry out the process successfully, thus avoiding the creation of false expectations and reinforcing a negative image; second, the methodologies, techniques and tools of the recognition sessions are geared above all towards self-analysis, self-recognition and self-assessment; and finally, the team members emphasise and extol competences that the adult has, and the assessment always has a positive focus. However, this process entails risks, as it may cause trauma, reinforce the adult’s negative image himself/herself and contribute to the cycle of failures in his/her life. This is why the Centres consider it crucial to implement a humanist perspective, centred on the personal development and encouragement of the adult. This is an extremely delicate field and requires permanent vigilance by the Centre’s teams, which should be attentive to the adults that begin the process but drop out before finishing it. Taking into account

the complexity of the process of recognition, it is essential that suitable methodologies and tools are used, such as support and monitoring of the adult by professionals fully aware of these challenges.

#### THE EMERGENCE AND ALTERATION OF PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES — THE RVC PROFESSIONAL AND THE RVC TRAINER

The work carried out in the RVCCC has given rise to a new professional activity — the RVC professional — and the trainers’ activity has changed profoundly, both in terms of functions carried out and with regard to attitude. The chart below has been constructed based on details collected in the 3 RVCCC under analysis, and identifies the functions and competences of the RVC professional and the RVC trainer. Analysis of the functional content and the competence of the RVC professional and the RVC trainer is essential, on the one hand to understand the process of recognition and validation of competences and the specificities involved in assessing competences based on an individual’s life path; on the other hand,

to understand the interdependence between the organisation and functioning of the device and the functions and competences shown by the teams of each Centre. Finally, it is argued that the functioning logic of the Centres and the social visibility of this process depends, essentially, on the work carried out by the teams, and therefore it makes sense to formalise and recognise the specificities of the functions that they take on, which is essential in the process to build their profession. Reflection on the functions and competences of the teams in charge of the RVCC is very important to strengthen the functioning philosophy of the Centre and to avoid the perversion of its specificities. The chart below identifies the functions and competences of the RVC professional and the RVC trainer. A cross (x) means that this skill is present in the profile of the corresponding professional, in at least one of the Centres under analysis. The variability of the work contexts influenced the professional profile of the intervening parties, and the differences in organisation and functioning of the device in the 3 RVCCS was evident in the functions and competences of the RVC professionals and the RVC trainers.

FUNCTIONS AND COMPETENCES OF THE RVC PROFESSIONAL AND RVC TRAINER

FUNCTIONS	COMPETENCES	RVC PROF.	RVC TRAIN.
1. Welcoming and registration of adults into the RVCS process, collection of data on the adult and clarification of the process	— Able to welcome adults in a pleasant manner, encouraging them to register and helping them overcome any initial anxiety	X	X
	— Able to clearly explain the RVCC process to the adults, so that they understand the phases and implications of the process	X	X
	— Able to guide and support the adults in filling out the registration forms and inform them about the kind of data required regarding the individual’s life path	X	X
	— Able to identify and analyse, based on dialogue and the data available in the registration forms, when the adult does not have a suitable profile for the RVCC process, channelling him/her to a different training alternative	X	X
2. Recognition of the adults’ competences in the RVCC process, by outlining their life experience and problem-solving ability	— Able to support the adults in filling in the mediation forms, explaining the purpose of each form and clarifying any doubts that arise when filling them in so that they understand the logic behind the process	X	
	— Able to involve the adults in the process, so that they feel motivated and committed to reflecting on their overall experience	X	
	— Able to motivate the adults to reflect on their personality and their life projects, encouraging them to explain and outline such a project	X	
	— Able to enliven small group sessions, generating a process of interpersonal collaboration among the adults involved, a dynamic discussion and exchange of ideas and experiences	X	
	— Able to support and motivate the adults to overcome obstacles and emotional states that hinder the reflection on their life experience	X	
	— Able to identify the knowledge and competences of each adult, either through the description of their life experience, or through situations supplied in the recognition sessions	X	X

(continua)

(continuation)

FUNCTIONS	COMPETENCES	RVC PROF.	RVC TRAIN.
2. Recognition of the adults' competences in the RVCC process, by outlining their life experience and problem-solving ability (continuation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Able to diagnose, in the first recognition sessions, whether the adults possess the minimum competences to carry on the process, guiding them towards becoming aware of this situation so that they understand that it may be more appropriate to seek other training alternatives or to suspend the RVC process until acquiring other knowledge and learning new competences</li> <li>– Able to guide the adults in the RVCC process to become aware of their knowledge and competences, encouraging a process of self-recognition</li> <li>– Able to put problem-situations to the adults to give them the opportunity to show their competences, and as such allow recognition in the key competences areas</li> <li>– Able to guide and support the RVC professionals in carrying out the problem-situations so that they can clarify the kinds of competences that may be recognised</li> </ul>	<p>X</p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p>	<p></p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p>
3. Validation of the adults' competences in the RVCC process, by comparing the adult's competences and the key benchmark competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Able to compare the knowledge and competences gained through the adults' life experience and the situations witnessed during the process, with the competences identified as the key benchmark competence</li> <li>– Able to analyse and discuss in a team the competences shown by the adult for each key benchmark competence area, proposing a complementary training plan for the adult, if necessary</li> <li>– Able to gauge the adults' recognition process in the validation panel and encourage the adults to carry on his/her training and accomplish their life projects, in a perspective of enrichment and recognition of the potential of each person</li> <li>– Able to justify and evaluate the complementary training at the moment the panel convenes, if the adult has undertaken the training</li> </ul>	<p>X</p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p>	<p>X</p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p>
4. Adaptation of the RVCC device, reworking and conception of the mediation and registration forms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Able to analyse the potential and weaknesses of the RVCC device, proposing changes in methodologies and procedures to bring about a better quality and more effective process, both for the adult and for the aims of the Centre</li> <li>– Able to design and rewrite the mediation forms applied in the recognition of competences and the forms used at the moment of registration in the RVCC process, enhancing the quality of the work carried out in the Centre and the involvement of the adult during the process</li> <li>– Able to design problem-situations that allow the identification of a wide set of competences and which make sense for the adults in the process, based on their life experiences and motivations</li> </ul>	<p>X</p> <p>X</p>	<p>X</p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p>
5. Interpretation, decoding and suggestions for changing the key benchmark competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Able to interpret and decode the benchmark competence making it a tool able to be used by all the team members, as well as the adults undergoing the process</li> <li>– Able to critically analyse the key benchmark competence in order to make them a more appropriate and pertinent tool for the RVCC process, suggesting the introduction, suspension or changing of competences</li> </ul>	<p>X</p> <p>X</p>	<p>X</p> <p>X</p>
6. Holding of complementary training to develop competences not recognised in the course of the RVCC process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Able to design a training plan adapted to each adult, which allows the development of competences that were not recognised during the process, based on the adults' life experience, knowledge and competences</li> <li>– Able to identify and transmit knowledge considered essential for the adult to develop the competences not recognised during the process</li> <li>– Able to guide and support the adults in the research so that they can automatically develop the competences that were not recognised during the process</li> <li>– Able to carry out problem-situations to understand to what extent the adult has developed the competences needed</li> </ul>		<p>X</p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p>
7. Publicising the RVCC process and organisation of the running of the Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Able to explain the RVCS process, the organisation and functioning of the Centre, both to institutional managers and to groups of adults who may be able to benefit from the process, encouraging their participation</li> </ul>	<p>X</p>	<p>X</p>

Note: RVC Prof. is an abbreviation for RVC Professional;  
and RVC Train. is an abbreviation for RVC Trainer

The RVC professional is a new professional activity, which has emerged as a result of the work carried out in the RVCCC. These professionals have an extremely important role in all the phases of the process and perform a wide-ranging set of functions, as can be gleaned from the above information. Nevertheless, one can consider their main function as the recognition of competences of adults with a low level of schooling. In carrying out their work, the RVC professionals' chief goals are to delve into the life paths of each adult to gather data that will allow them to ascertain to what extent the adult possesses the benchmark competences, and to motivate and involve the adult in the process of reflection, self-analysis, self-recognition and self-assessment. In addition to the recognition, these professionals also validate some competences and design the mediation and registration forms. The mediation forms are essential tools to guarantee an effective process of recognition and to guarantee the motivation and commitment of the adults. Hence reworking and designing new forms is an extremely important task. Validation of competences is also one of the functions that the RVC professional carries out, emitting an opinion on the competences that the adult showed during the process to the RVC trainer. Welcoming and registering the adult into the process and publicising the Centre are other functions also carried out by the RVC professionals. In one of the Centres the welcoming and registration of the adults is a job exclusively carried out by the RVC professional. At the Centre in question, this is a moment of collection of information about the adults, which allows them to be channelled to other training opportunities when it is judged that the adult's profile is not suitable for the RVCC process.

The RVC professional establishes a very close relation with the adults during the process, because on the one hand the filling in of the mediation forms occupies most of the sessions of the RVCC process, and on the other hand the topic tackled in the recognition sessions is essentially the life experience of the adults. The RVC professionals stimulate the remembrance of life experiences and dialogue, explain the activities of each function/task, in

writing, and encourage debate, cooperation and the interpersonal relations among the group members. When carrying out their work the RVC professionals perform several roles, such as animator, educator, and monitor, depending on the situations and what is requested by the adult. They adopt the role of an animator when they supervise the recognition sessions which are carried out in small groups in a dynamic manner, encouraging discussion and joint reflection and reinforcing situations of mutual help that arise naturally among the adults. They adopt the role of an educator when explaining the process, giving information about the organisation of the dossier and filling in the mediation forms and when clarifying the adults' doubts during the process. They adopt the role of the monitor when during the recognition they listen to the narration of the adult's life path, and motivate the adult to reflect on the past, present and future outlook and help him/her to become aware of the competences he/she possesses or can learn. This final role is the most important of the RVC professional's activity, and is the role that best fits into the presuppositions of the process itself. In accepting the role of a monitor, the RVC professional becomes "a facilitator, an aid [...], an emancipator" (Lhotellier, 2001, p. 196).

The RVC professional guarantees personalised monitoring and becomes an ally of the adult. The main topic of conversation, reflection and debate is the life path, interests and motivations of the adult. Monitoring by the professional is essential in the entire recognition phase. It is this personalised supportive relationship that allows the adult to be guided in the right direction, as well as to motivate him, increase his commitment, encourage self-recognition and self-esteem. In the opinion of Guy Le Bouëdec (2001a, p. 24) "monitoring is journeying with somebody, alongside him/her, journeying in company". The RVC professional travels a road with the adult while the adult speaks and writes about his/her life; during this journey to organise the personal dossier, the adult is the "main actor", the RVC professional supports and helps but does not put himself in the place of the adult or at the centre of the action, "not directing the events" (Bouëdec, 2001a, p. 24).

During the monitoring in the RVCS process the professional takes on different stances, as re-

ferred to by the examples presented by Robert Stahl (2001, p. 104). Most of the time he/she is a listener, helping the adults to build the narration of their life path, asking questions, and guiding their reflection; sometimes the professional adopts a register of analysis, which is especially noticeable when he/she diagnoses the adults' competences based on the narration and the benchmarks; and also a register of influence may be adopted, when the adults are shown the analysis that the professional carried out, which is essential to make the adults aware of the competences they possess or can learn. The RVC professionals, when exercising influence, usually do so as a strategy to enrich the adults to transmit confidence in their abilities and to encourage the adults' self-recognition, which is very important for adults who undertake the RVCC process. These adults in most cases feel stigmatised by their low level of schooling, ignoring and devaluing their experience, knowledge and competences. When adults recognise their own abilities, they understand that they have resources to influence their present and future. The adoption of the different registers during the monitoring depends on the adult in question, the dynamics that were generated during the sessions and the professional's competences. In any event, the RVC professional should be careful to make sure the correct attitude is permanently adopted both by himself/herself and the teams, because "the monitoring is not neutral" (Bouëdec, 2001c, p. 104).

The RVC professional, when adopting a monitoring stance, should show an enriching, positive and pleasant attitude towards the adults. As mentioned by Hennezel and Montigny (*cit. in* Bouëdec, 2001b, p. 49) "among the basic qualities of good monitoring, I insist on humility, authenticity, spontaneity, generosity, an open spirit, respect for difference, pleasantness and capacity to bear silences." The relationship in a monitoring situation is unknown for the adults and built by the professional based on his/her work experience. In the discourse of the RVC professionals it is obvious that they learn "through the practice, by making constant adjustments" (Bouëdec & Pasquier, 2001, pp. 16), but they also extol the value of ongoing training, considering it essential for their professional evolution. The RVC professionals can be considered "fa-

cilitators" in the sense attributed by Christine Josso (2005, p. 119) because they are concerned about knowing where the person wants to go and try to understand the kind of help that can be provided during a short period on this journey. The emergence of the RVC professional in the RVCCC gives rise to a professional activity that in order to benefit all who take part in the process should be defined and based on a legal framework. It is important to clarify and define the functions and activities of this new professional, the competences required to exercise the profession and the ethical and deontological rules that should serve as guidelines.

#### CHANGES OF THE TRAINING PROFESSION — THE RVC TRAINER

The trainers integrated into the RVCCC teams carry out a set of functions that give rise to a change in the functional content of the trainer's profession. As can be gleaned from reading the chart above, the RVCC trainers carry out a wide set of different functions. To ensure a suitable performance they have to implement specific competences, which are different from those required when they exercised their functions as teachers or trainers, as learned in their professional training. The aforementioned functions and competences are systematised based on the professional activity of the trainers in the 3 Centres under analysis. However, the specific functional content varies somewhat from Centre to Centre. For example, in one of the Centres the trainers do not usually come into direct contact with the adults, and in this case their main function is to guide and support the RVC professionals in carrying out the problem-situations. Taking into account the specificities of the functional content of each Centre, one can outline the main functions of the trainers, in accordance with the time expended on each function, as follows: validation of the competences of the adult undergoing the RVCC process; holding complementary training; interpretation, decoding and suggesting changes to the key benchmark competences; and reworking/redesign of the problem-situations. In other words, the trainers in the RVCC process essentially carry out functions linked to the assessment of competences, distancing themselves from the function traditionally



associated with trainers — the imparting of knowledge. This change of the main function usually attributed to the trainers results from the purpose of the RVCCC and contributes towards increasing the already diverse and changeable professional profiles of the trainers as identified by several authors, and which is highlighted in the statement by Véronique Leclercq (2005, p. 110): “the missions of training are constantly redefined, and the boundary lines of the profession are vague and have a variable geometry.”

The main goal of the RVCC trainers is to assess the adults’ competences, and to identify and explore as exhaustively as possible the competences gained by the adults throughout their life, comparing them to the benchmark competences. The complementary training comprises very few hours, usually varying between 4 and 12 hours for each key area, and the adults only attend them when some competences are not detected in the recognition phase. The complementary training focuses on the domain of know-how and is geared towards the identification and development of competences. The adult is given problem-situations in which they have to use a range of “resources” to overcome the challenge. The trainer guides the resolution and simultaneously explains some details of an essentially theoretical nature to complete the task. The knowledge imparted is only that which is considered essential for the adult to be able to develop a given competence. In other words, they are understood as tools “to think and act” as stated by Philippe Perrenoud (2000, p. 21) and not as an end in themselves. It is what the aforementioned author labels “living knowledge”. The training is an essential aspect for the development of competences, and given the short period of the training one may ask the question: Is it possible to develop competences through the complementary training given in the RVCC process?

The new functions of the RVC trainers demand the development of other professional knowledge and other competences. Most of the trainers of the RVCCC under analysis had training experience in a school context which forced them to rethink and reformulate their methods of intervention. This was obvious in the following statement from one of the interviewees: “I had to forget a little what I had learned at school [when I was teaching]”. This ability to “forget” and “unlearn” as mentioned by Christine Josso (2005,

p. 124) is vital to carry out processes of change. Nevertheless, knowing “how to forget” implies complex processes at the cognitive and emotional level, which only occur when the actors are committed and motivated to face up to the new challenges. Changes have taken place in the activity of the RVC trainer in terms of the functions and also the attitudes. One of the presuppositions inherent to the work of the RVC trainers is inspired on the humanist theory advocated by Rogers, who believes that “all men have the resources to develop; the role of the educator is to listen in a pleasant manner, help to clarify through reformulation, and do this in a climate of unconditional acceptance” (*cit. in* Bouëdec & Pasquier, 2001, p. 14). This presupposition is crucial in the process of recognition and validation of competences, because the trainer does not have the main goal of transmitting content to adults, but rather to identify and extol the competences that they show, helping them to progress based on their experience and resources. As can be seen, the presupposition mentioned above has implications on the role of the trainer who “becomes the facilitator, aiding the learning, organising complex situations, inventing problems and challenges, proposing enigmas or projects” (Perrenoud, 2000, p. 37). In carrying out their work, the RVCC trainers value the experience of the adults; view theory/practice in a dialectic relation; encourage dialogue, reflection and debate of subjects related to the adults’ lives and motivate them to intervene; and establish a learning relationship with the adults, where both parties teach and learn, which also fits into the perspective of problematized education advocated by Paulo Freire (1972).

The trainers face certain challenges caused by the complexity of their main function, which is to assess competences based on the life path of the adults. Therefore, it is essential to undertake permanent reflection, both individually and in a team, with regard to the techniques and tools used to ascertain and assess competences and on the pertinence and suitability of the key benchmark competences. The assessment tools must make sense for the adults, encourage their commitment and self-assessment and allow the gauging and assessment of competences. The benchmark competences are the main working tool of the RVCCC teams, and both the trainers and the RVC professionals believe that some of the competences listed are based on disci-

plinary knowledge which are not recognised for social use. Reflection on the fragilities of the benchmark competences and identification of proposals to improve this working tool, presented to the authorities, is vital to improve the RVCC process. The trainer's attitude is another aspect that should be the object of constant analysis and reflection, given that his/her main function — assessment — raises ethical and deontological questions, which is even more pressing in the case of RVCCC, where the assessment is grounded on the life experiences of each adult and intends to be formative and encouraging.

## CONCLUSION

The assumptions that act as guidelines for the work carried out in the RVCCC are based on valuing the experience and abilities of the individual, considering him/her the main actor in the formative process. The complexity inherent to the process of recognition and validation of competences results from the nature of the facets that make up the process — the competences, the experience and also the question of the assessment. The assumptions and nature of the facets inherent to the RVCC process entail a set of implications affecting the model of organisation and functioning of the Centres under study; as well as on the functions and attitudes of the professionals that work in them. The teams that work in the Centres have an essential role to play in managing the complexity, challenges and tensions that arise during the process of recognition and validation of competences.

Taking into account the character and dynamics of RVCC brought into play by the actors on the ground, one can view the Centres as small structures that work as a project team, with a mission to fulfil, and where all the professionals involved have a contribution to make to increase the quality and efficacy of the device. The validation of competences, the reworking of the RVCC device, the designing of forms and the disclosure of the service are functional areas carried out by teams in the 3 Centres under analysis. The teamwork leads to similarity among the functions carried out by the RVC professionals and trainers, and there is close articulation and intertwining of the various team members, where information is shared in an atmosphere of

constant mutual support. The actors recognise the importance of teamwork and consider it indispensable taking into account the mission of the Centres, which is to recognise and validate competences through an approach focused on experience.

The start of this paper briefly outlined the problem of the complexity inherent to the nature of some of the aspects underpinning the RVCC process — the question of the competences, the life experience and the assessment. These aspects are at the heart of some of the main difficulties and tensions of the process and also affect the functions and competences required by the teams of the Centres. By analysing the functions and competences of the RVC professionals and RVC trainers it is possible to highlight some constraints and difficulties related to the professional activity:

§ the work of the RVC professionals and trainers is conditioned by a tension between two “humanist assessment/instrumental assessment” philosophies. On the one hand, the teams of the Centres under analysis try to undertake the assessment centred on the adult, on self-assessment and on self-recognition, which allows a training process to be triggered; on the other hand, the political power based on the idea of instrumental assessment requires a quantitative target to be met in relation to the number of certified adults. The Centres under study have resisted, as far as possible, the instrumental assessment route, which is proving increasingly difficult as the number of RVCCC is rising along with the competition among them. This situation is clear in the discourse of an RVC professional interviewed, who said: “we always try to adapt the methodologies to the people as best as possible, but we can't adapt them to each person; we can't manage this as we have targets to meet”;

§ the decision to channel adults to other kinds of training or to let them continue the process to better understand their competences is a very difficult one to make for the RVC professionals and trainers. This situation gives rise the “giving an opportunity/preventing failure” dilemma. The RVC professionals and RVC trainers try to filter the adults as early as possible to avoid failure in the RVCC process, and as such in the initial sessions they try to define who is prepared to continue the process, and who is not and should be channelled to other kinds of training.

This sometimes leads to tricky situations to solve (e.g. when there is no suitable alternative training, or when the person has already tried several possibilities and has experienced repeated lack of success);

§ the RVC professionals and RVC trainers are faced with the difficulty of making the adult understand the idea behind the process, which is essential for its success. The RVCC process is new, the adults do not have references as to the model, which is different from the school model, and technical terms are used that they are not familiar with and which they cannot grasp (e.g. competences, benchmark, mediation forms, complementary training, RVC professional). The adults begin to understand the idea through successive adjustments during the process, but some possibly never really understand it. The novelty of the situation and the vocabulary is mentioned by one of the adults interviewed: “a vocabulary that I did not know, plus a novelty, new things [...] I did a kind of essay, no copy, I don’t know the correct term...”;

§ the design and reworking of the mediation forms constitute one of the main difficulties for the teams of the RVCC process, and gives rise to a set of dilemmas that are difficult to solve, of which we highlight the following: complexity/facility (allow the exhaustive and detailed identification of competences/allow a more vague identification, so as to encourage the commitment and reflection of the adult); speed/quality (guarantee speed in filling in the form to make it easy to comply with the RVCCC targets/guarantee the quality, ensuring the good image and credibility of the process, the professionals involved and the Centre); stability/change (the stability of the forms is essential to guarantee better use of Centres’ time and resources/constant change and adaptation is essential to adapt the forms to the specificity of each adult’s life path and to make the most of the accumulated experience of the Centres’ teams), exhaustiveness/intimateness (allow the best possible capture of the adult’s whole life, but prevent the exhaustiveness of the data collection from delving into intimate aspects of the adult’s life);

§ when the RVC professional tries to help the adult overcome delicate situations (e.g. when the adult becomes emotional in front of the group, when he/she talks about his life in a confidential tone), it is not always easy to demarcate the limits

between the RVC professional, the psychologist and the friend. This difficulty is noticeable in the discourse of an interviewed RVC professional: “we cannot let ourselves become too involved, our function is not to be anyone’s psychologist; we have a different function, so we need to have the barrier up to where we can go with them very well defined [...] but it’s not easy”;

§ ascertaining competences based on the adult’s discourse is an extremely difficult task for the RVCC teams. What each adult says refers to practical and contextual knowledge, whereas the benchmark competences obey a different set of rules based on theoretical knowledge and contents. The RVC professionals and RVC trainers have to carry out a meticulous decoding task and put themselves in the place of the adult, which is not easy when dealing with situations they do not know and about which they have no kind of reference;

§ the building of problem situations constitutes a difficulty for the RVC trainers, and gives rise to a tension that can be labelled complexity/suitability. It is difficult to design problem-situations in which one can simultaneously identify a set of wide-ranging competences (complexity) and which are pertinent and suitable for the specificities of each adult’s path (suitability). The application of the problem-situations by the RVC professionals is a difficult task that requires the articulation and monitoring of the trainers, which is not always possible when the trainers work part-time in the RVCCC;

§ in the complementary training the trainers face the “expose/recognise” dilemma. They either opt for a strategy of exposing the content so that the adult acquires resources and develops the competences that were not recognised, or they opt for a strategy of recognition of competences through solving problem-situations. The complementary training entails a big risk of perverting the philosophy behind the RVCC process if the trainer opts for exposure and demonstration of knowledge.

The RVC trainers and RVC professionals showed a good degree of consistent reflection concerning the work they carry out, which enables them to acquire a critical understanding of the way they exercise their profession. This is extremely positive for the Centres and for their professional evolution.

The ability of the team members of the RVCCC to undertake critical reflection is extremely important for several reasons: the Centres are a very recent initiative and need to consolidate their methodologies and working tools; they function based on a perspective of valuing the competences of individuals that are diametrically opposite to competences acquired in the school model, and therefore a critical attitude is important to avoid the perversion of the perspective implemented in the RVCCC. In addition to the knowledge they should possess, the attitude adopted is an extremely important aspect in performing the professional activities, both for the RVC professionals and trainers. In carrying out

their functions these actors face a set of issues linked to ethics and professional deontology and which should be the object of individual and collective discussion and reflection. The RVCCC under analysis are undergoing a phase where they need their organisational culture to be consolidated, confirming the usefulness and validity of their action, so as to achieve visibility, enrichment and social recognition. To do so, it is essential to legally define the profession and the career of the RVC professionals and trainers who work in the Centres, in order to guarantee the stabilisation of the teams and their growing intervention in this project of recognition, validation and certification of competences.

## ENDNOTES

1. This paper was written as part of the Working Group on Recognition and Validation of prior experiential learning run by ADMÉE Europe, and will be published in a magazine published by Octares.

2. The RVCSC of ESDIME, in Ferreira do Alentejo; the RVCSC of the *Fundação Alentejo*, in Évora and the RVCSC of the Portalegre Professional Training Centre, in Portalegre.

3. The certificate attributed to the adults is issued by the Ministry of Education and for all due purposes is equivalent to that obtained in the normal educational system.

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Translated by Thomas Kundert

