

TURNING KNOWLEDGE INTO CAPITAL: HOW ADULT EDUCATION AND RVCC UNLOCK COMMUNITY ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN RURAL TERRITORIES

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Abstract

This study examines how Adult Education and the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competencies processes (RVCC) can be strategically mobilized to activate human capital, foster local entrepreneurship and promote sustainable development in Almodôvar, a low-density rural municipality in the Alentejo region. Based on a qualitative and exploratory approach, supported by semi-structured interviews with 15 participants, including learners and programme promoters, and analysed through thematic analysis, the research repositions competency recognition as a strategic resource rather than merely an educational outcome. The findings show that structured learning pathways and the recognition of experiential knowledge function as catalysts for individual empowerment, increased employability and strengthened entrepreneurial confidence, generating human capital with relevance for local economic dynamics. At the community level, these initiatives reinforce trust-based cooperation networks and stimulate civic engagement, both essential for territorially rooted entrepreneurial ecosystems. However, structural barriers persist, including mobility constraints, scheduling rigidity and resource scarcity, which limit expansion, sustainability and overall impact.

Keywords: Adult Education; RVCC; Strategic Empowerment; Community Entrepreneurship; Human Capital; Territorial Resilience; Lifelong Learning; Rural Development.

JEL Classification: R11, R12, L26, J24, Q18

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1. Introduction

Low-density rural territories across southern Europe face persistent structural challenges, including depopulation, demographic ageing, economic fragility, and limited institutional density, which together constrain their development trajectories; in regions such as Alentejo in southern Portugal, these dynamics have eroded local labour markets and weakened the conditions for entrepreneurship and innovation, yet a growing body of research on endogenous rural development argues that the future of these territories depends less on attracting external resources than on activating and mobilising locally available assets, particularly human capital (Almeida and Daniel, 2023). Within this perspective, adult education and lifelong learning emerge as strategic levers for territorial resilience, and in Portugal, the RVCC process, delivered through the national network of Qualifica Centres, allows adults to formally validate knowledge and skills acquired through professional, civic, and everyday experience; by converting tacit and often invisible knowledge into recognised qualifications, RVCC has the potential to improve employability, strengthen self-confidence, and expand individuals' capacity to engage in economic and entrepreneurial activity (Biney, 2023), although the principal challenge facing many low-density territories is not the absence of capabilities but the limited recognition and mobilisation of competencies that already exist within their communities. Despite the policy relevance of these processes, their role as instruments of human capital activation and community entrepreneurship in rural contexts remains insufficiently understood, particularly from the perspective of those who experience them directly, as existing research has tended to treat competency recognition as an educational outcome rather than as a strategic resource for local development. This study addresses this gap by examining how Adult Education and the RVCC process can be strategically mobilised to activate human capital, foster local entrepreneurship, and promote sustainable development in Almodôvar, a low-density rural municipality in Alentejo, adopting a qualitative and exploratory approach based on semi-structured interviews with fifteen participants, including adult learners and programme promoters, which were analysed through thematic analysis to reposition competency recognition as a strategic resource rather than a mere educational result.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical architecture of this study integrates three interconnected domains: human capital theory applied to territorial development, lifelong learning and competency recognition as instruments of empowerment, and community entrepreneurship as a dimension of endogenous rural development.

Human capital theory conceptualises investment in education, skills and experiential knowledge as a driver of productive capacity and territorial resilience, and in low density rural regions the recognition and formalisation of competencies acquired through life and work experience, such as those validated through RVCC processes, can be understood as a mechanism of human capital activation whereby the conversion of tacit knowledge into recognised qualifications improves individuals' labour market positioning and expands their potential contribution to local economic development and entrepreneurial activity (Bin & Qiong, 2024).

This process is reinforced by transformative and experiential learning perspectives, which emphasise that adult learning grounded in lived experience promotes identity reconstruction, agency and enhanced self-efficacy, particularly among adults with interrupted educational trajectories, where reflective and autobiographical methodologies enable participants to reinterpret professional, family and community experiences as valuable learning assets and recognised competencies (Wang et al., 2021).

At the community level, social capital and communities of practice provide a useful lens for understanding how learning environments generate trust based networks with entrepreneurial relevance, as shared learning experiences and mutual recognition foster collaborative norms, peer support and knowledge exchange, thereby strengthening entrepreneurial ecosystems embedded in local territories while, in rural contexts, these relational resources often compensate for institutional fragility and limited market opportunities (O'Connor & Audretsch, 2023). Within this framework, community entrepreneurship is understood not

merely as business creation but as the collective mobilisation of local actors around shared development objectives, with adult education initiatives that strengthen local capabilities, social cohesion and collaborative action contributing to the emergence of community based entrepreneurial processes and sustainable rural development (Hertel et al., 2019). Despite this conceptual richness, the three domains have largely developed in parallel, leaving important gaps. Although human capital theory and lifelong learning explain individual qualification and social capital explains collective cooperation, the literature rarely explains how the formal recognition of experiential competencies serves as a bridging mechanism that converts activated individual human capital into collective, territorially embedded entrepreneurship, particularly in low-density rural settings where institutional support is scarce, and entrepreneurial ecosystem research remains predominantly urban-centric and provides limited conceptual tools for these rural territories, where the configuration of actors, resources, and institutions differs markedly from metropolitan contexts (Aguilar, 2021). In parallel, recognition of prior learning in Portugal has been examined chiefly through a utilitarian, employability-oriented lens, with little attention to its potential as a catalyst of community entrepreneurship and endogenous development (Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021). Finally, the gendered and contextual barriers that determine who can effectively mobilise recognised competencies remain under-theorised, even though they decisively shape participation and outcomes in rural areas (Semkunde et al., 2022). Addressing these interrelated gaps, the present study positions RVCC as a strategic resource for human capital activation and community entrepreneurship in a low-density rural territory.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive-exploratory design, an approach that is particularly suitable for examining social phenomena through the meanings and interpretations attributed by participants to their own experiences (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). This methodological orientation is consistent with the objective of understanding how educational processes are experienced and perceived in specific contexts rather than evaluating them through standardised quantitative indicators (Doyle et al., 2020). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a widely used technique in qualitative research because it allows participants to describe their experiences while providing sufficient flexibility to explore emerging themes (Kallio et al., 2016). The sample comprised 15 participants divided into two groups: ten adult learners enrolled in or recently completing RVCC processes at the Qualifica Centre of Almodôvar and five programme promoters and technical staff involved in the planning and implementation of adult education initiatives. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in educational background, occupational status, and level of engagement with the programmes, thereby maximising the richness and variation of perspectives collected (Campbell et al., 2020). Two interview protocols were developed, one for each participant group, following recommendations that interview guides should be adapted to the characteristics and roles of respondents to enhance the relevance and depth of the data obtained (Kallio et al., 2016). The interviews were structured around five thematic dimensions: educational trajectories and participation experiences; expectations and perceived outcomes; individual and community impacts; barriers and facilitating factors; and recommendations for programme improvement. Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes, were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data (Doyle et al., 2020). Data analysis followed the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), a flexible and rigorous method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The analytical process involved familiarisation with the data, systematic coding supported by MAXQDA software, the development and refinement of thematic categories, and independent validation by two researchers to enhance analytical consistency and credibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To further strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, methodological triangulation was employed through the comparison of interview data with programme documentation and institutional reports, a strategy widely recognised for improving the credibility and robustness of qualitative research (Carter et al., 2014).

4. Results and Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the RVCC process extends well beyond its formal educational function, acting as a mechanism for human capital activation and local development. Both adult learners and programme promoters highlighted that the recognition of competencies acquired through professional and life experiences contributed to significant changes in self-perception, confidence, and social positioning. Participants reported a stronger awareness of their capabilities and greater legitimacy regarding their knowledge and skills, while formal certification was associated with improved employability, enhanced professional credibility, and, in some cases, opportunities for self-employment or the expansion of existing economic activities. These findings support the argument that the recognition of prior learning transforms experiential knowledge into formally recognised competencies with economic and social value (Baumeler et al., 2023). By making previously informal and often invisible knowledge visible and transferable, RVCC contributes not only to educational attainment but also to employability, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial readiness, a result that is consistent with recent evidence from Portuguese Qualifica Centres (Cardim et al., 2026; Biney, 2023). The reflective portfolio methodology emerged as a particularly important tool in this process, enabling participants to identify, organise, and communicate competencies developed throughout their life trajectories (Calha, 2017). The results further indicate that RVCC contributes to the activation of entrepreneurial attitudes and lifelong learning dispositions. Fourteen participants reported improvements in professional competencies, twelve highlighted increased self-confidence, and ten indicated greater participation in community activities. Several learners described a greater willingness to take initiative, manage professional risks, and formalise previously informal practices. Although business creation was not directly assessed, these outcomes reflect key antecedents of entrepreneurial behaviour, including confidence, self-awareness, and perceived legitimacy. This evidence reinforces previous research highlighting the role of human capital development and lifelong learning in fostering entrepreneurship and regional resilience (Biney, 2023). At the collective level, the programmes generated important relational benefits. Most participants referred to the creation or strengthening of cooperation networks, mutual support relationships, and local social ties that frequently persisted beyond the duration of the educational activities. Promoters emphasised that the programmes created valuable opportunities for interaction in a geographically dispersed rural territory, contributing to trust-building, collective identity, and collaborative capacity. These findings are particularly relevant from a territorial development perspective, as informal social networks often function as entrepreneurial support structures in contexts characterised by low institutional density (Hammer & Frimanslund, 2022). Previous studies similarly emphasise the importance of social capital and cooperative networks in supporting entrepreneurship and local economic development (Zhao & Li, 2021). The results also suggest that the principal challenge facing low-density rural territories is not a lack of capabilities but rather the limited recognition and mobilisation of existing competencies (Almeida & Daniel, 2024). By validating knowledge acquired through work, civic participation, and everyday experience, RVCC transforms latent resources into active development assets that strengthen both individual agency and community participation (Baumeler et al., 2023). Despite these positive outcomes, participants identified several barriers that restrict programme accessibility and long-term impact, including transportation difficulties, scheduling inflexibility, limited resources, and insufficient outreach. These constraints were particularly significant for women with caregiving responsibilities. Such barriers reflect broader spatial inequalities that characterise many rural territories and continue to limit the scalability of adult education initiatives. Consistent with previous research on rural entrepreneurship and territorial development, overcoming these challenges requires flexible, locally embedded, and partnership-based implementation models capable of responding to the specific realities of low-density regions (Pato et al., 2021; Candeias & Sarkar, 2022).

5. Conclusion

This study examined how RVCC process can be strategically mobilised to activate human capital, foster local entrepreneurship, and promote sustainable development in a low-density rural municipality in Alentejo. Drawing on a qualitative and exploratory approach, the

findings show that RVCC operates well beyond its formal educational function by acting as a mechanism for human capital activation and local development. At the individual level, the recognition of competencies acquired through life and work experience strengthens participants' self-perception, confidence, and social legitimacy, while formal certification is associated with improved employability, professional credibility, and, in some cases, opportunities for self-employment or the expansion of existing activities, outcomes that reflect key antecedents of entrepreneurial behaviour and suggest that competency recognition nurtures entrepreneurial readiness and lifelong learning dispositions. At the collective level, the programmes reinforce trust-based cooperation networks, mutual support, and civic engagement, which are relational resources of particular importance in geographically dispersed territories characterised by low institutional density. Taken together, the results support the central argument that the main challenge facing low-density rural territories is not a lack of capabilities but rather the limited recognition and mobilisation of existing competencies, since by making invisible knowledge visible and transferable, RVCC converts latent resources into active development assets that strengthen both individual agency and community participation. Nevertheless, structural barriers, including mobility constraints, scheduling rigidity, resource scarcity, and limited outreach, continue to restrict accessibility and long-term impact, with particularly significant effects for women with caregiving responsibilities, which indicates that overcoming these constraints requires flexible, locally embedded, and partnership-based implementation models attuned to the realities of low-density regions. This study is not without limitations, as its qualitative and exploratory design and its focus on a single municipality limit the generalisability of the findings, and entrepreneurial outcomes were assessed through perceptions and antecedents rather than measured business creation. Future research could adopt comparative or longitudinal designs across multiple territories, combine qualitative and quantitative evidence, and examine more directly the long-term links between competency recognition, entrepreneurship, and territorial resilience. Overall, the study reinforces the value of repositioning adult education and competency recognition as strategic instruments for unlocking community entrepreneurship and sustainable development in rural territories.

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