

## **Challenges to Cultural Learning through International Cooperation: Festival of Sra. D'Agonia- Portugal**

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### **Abstract**

*The importance of cultural learning in general is increasingly being recognized in Portugal, not only for its cultural and human value, but also for the contribution it makes to local, regional and national economies. This article summarizes the perceptions and information made by some members of staff of a BA program on “Arts and Cultural Management” (Gestão Artística e Cultural), created in 2007 by the Higher School of Education at Viana do Castelo Polytechnic, in Northern Portugal. It presents data on the current Portuguese economic situation and strategies of cultural learning and cooperation at national and international level, in a small scale research project which is being developed in collaboration with the local Municipality of Viana do Castelo and De Montfort University at Leicester, United Kingdom. It intends to add to arts management literature a case that is demonstrating some benefit to public authorities, crafts makers and the wider artistic and business communities at local, regional and national levels. It is anticipated that the strength of this study lies in its implications for cultural learning and international cooperation.*

**Keywords:** International Cooperation; Arts and Cultural Management; Cultural Learning

### **Introduction**

The aim of this article is to summarize the perceptions on cultural learning and international cooperation by some members of staff of a BA program on “Arts and Cultural Management” (Gestão Artística e Cultural), created in 2007 for Portuguese art and cultural management agents, offered by the Higher School of Education at Viana do Castelo Polytechnic, in Northern Portugal, which is a small city with 40,000 inhabitants.

This BA is a result of an inter-institutional cooperation in a geographical context, which is struggling today with the arts and culture underfunding in a manner similar to that of other national and international contexts of many communities. There is little scientific data on the social and economical impact of culture in the northern region of Alto Minho, and specifically in Viana do Castelo. Teachers of this course are aware that mutual cultural understanding and effective communication skills are necessary for the best development of this cultural context. Cultural learning is understood as the way that allows citizens to recognize and understand their own cultural values and the evolutionary nature of culture and processes as a potential for change (Moura, 2013).

Until 2007, anyone who wanted to study for an undergraduate degree in artistic and cultural management had to do so abroad, and the situation in postgraduate studies was very similar. The approach by cultural agents used to focus almost exclusively on their own living experience and self-knowledge, resulting in inadequate practices regarding arts and cultural management, and lack of critical thought on the production, distribution and access to cultural and artistic goods and services.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

According to many authors such as Silva and Cardoso (2013), in the last four decades 'Portugal underwent deep demographic, social, economic, cultural and political changes, which transformed not only its physical and socio-economic morphology, but also its cultural and political configuration' (p.17). Allison (in Moura, 2000) defines culture as all aspects of human endeavor which characterize a particular society, including its language, forms of knowledge, images, religions and the economics and politics which underpin attitudes, values and beliefs. Chalmers (1996, p.37) defines in a similar way the same concept of culture: "a system of communication and meanings which include patterns, beliefs, customs, traditions, ideas, values, and social norms of families and social groups, organization and activities shared by the members of community. The culture in part determines how the children are trained and how beliefs and values are maintained from generation to generation. Culture includes education, religion, science, art, folklore, and social organization". These and other authors distinguish two aspects of culture: (i) as an objective reality: a completed work with concrete results and (ii) as a lived reality involving participation in a continuity that is in action and an active configuration of values (cultural models) (Gumbe, 2014, p. 33).

Art is explained by Allison (1972), among other things as a phenomenon of culture. Art, as an element of culture, can play a strong role in community development (McFee, 1991; Moura, 2000) through job creation and improving their quality of life (Rocha, 2000). Gumbe (2014) states that "if a society is to develop sustainably and to maintain its uniqueness, development must be based firmly on its arts and culture" (p. 24). Cultural learning is the way to enable people from all ages to recognize and understand their own cultural values, beliefs and assumptions. In this article this concept is defined as learning directed at the formation of group identity, understanding of diversity and cultural participation (Mason and Buschkühle, 2013). In other words, McFee (1991) states that: Each member of a culture learns to read or understand their culture through art that expresses values, patterns of organizations, social structures and belief systems. Every culture has some form of art even though the members may not have a concept or word for it. The world is rapidly moving to international visualization of images as a means of communication (p.17).

McFee and Degge (1977) state that change in art, as in culture, happens when groups become mixed, when new ideas, events, change people's ways of life as a result of external and internal pressures and consequently fundamental changes in value provoke strong changes in the art forms that express them. These American researchers added that in most societies people from different generations can be identified not only by their size but also by differences in the symbols used by them. Cultural events that include art, offer a fascinating insight into social and cultural characteristics of the communities involved (Portugal, 2000).

Although both the traditional and contemporary arts are very much alive in Alto Minho, teachers and researchers are concerned (Campion et al, 2013) that current trends may lead to a situation where the contemporary arts may displace traditional arts, which may become extinct if not preserved. Art, culture and creative expression are configuring agents of educational effects and, therefore, art education can be a means of transforming individuals and society. The students need to understand that mutual cultural understanding and effective communication skills are necessary for the best use of their shared artistic and cultural values. Allison (1972, p.10) pointed out that understanding the cultural context of art is dependent upon knowledge drawn from a variety of fields such as anthropology, sociology, theology and geography.

He noted also that, whilst with different emphases, knowledge in these fields is being acquired in other areas of the school curriculum and it is important that they are directly related to art in particular and culture in general. Conversely, the art products often form the major means for understanding the nature of a culture. The origins, roles, functions and styles of the art forms in relation to the characteristics of the cultures need to be made explicit (p.10).

### **Portuguese Cultural Sector**

Culture has been one of the fields most affected by the world crisis, and one of the biggest problems of the cultural sector is financing (Moura et al, 2015). The report on cultural and creative sector in Portugal, by Augusto Mateus & Associados (2010), gives a clear perception of the Portuguese reality in the cultural sector and its key macro features. Bearing in mind the strong link between culture and sustainability, the figures from the study indicated that the cultural and creative sector represents 2.8% of the wealth generated in Portugal and employs 127.000 people. This can be the basis for a profound advocacy for change in domestic and local cultural policy.

However, other reports and seminal national authors have been arguing the need of capitalizing efforts and investments in the cultural sector itself. In fact, there are a wide range of cultural enterprises in Alto Minho as mentioned on the report by AGADIC & ADDICT (2011), studies related to cultural and creative industries in Galiza and Northern Portugal, but limited research was done in terms of their cultural, social and economic impacts. Santos concluded in the 2005 study entitled "Contribuições para a formulação de políticas públicas no Horizonte 2013", that Portuguese cultural networks had no relevant strengths and their main weaknesses were the occasional and informal traits of the collaborations and partnerships. Whereas Throsby (2001) reported that cultural activities may generate employment, income, and other value-added benefits, such as cultural enhancement and attractiveness for mobility. There is, however, an increasing need to investigate the relationship between cultural enterprises and networks in order to identify their potentialities for sustainable growth. Research on the formal and informal, internal and external, intentional and even unintentional existing networks, is a crucial dimension for further conclusions on strategies for cultural development, economic initiatives, and cultural policy recommendations.

After decades of cultural, social and political isolation (until 1974) and a brief historical moment of "revolutionary" and downstream culture, Portugal has made an effort to put itself on a par with other European countries with regard to the production and distribution of culture and arts (examples of which are the *Serralves Museum* and the *Casa da Música* in Porto, Northern Portugal), despite all financial constraints.

The importance of culture is recognized in the Portuguese National Strategic Reference Frameworks, according to the European Commission, Cohesion Policy: National Strategic Reference Frameworks (NSRF, 2007) and was addressed in a specific preparatory study coordinated by the observatory of cultural activities (Observatório das Actividades Culturais). In fact, the National Strategic Reference Frameworks, when identifying their strategic priorities, explicitly states that it: "(...) promotes the qualification of the Portuguese population by developing and stimulating knowledge, science, technology, innovation, education and culture as the main means of developing the country and raising its competitiveness." (p.57), and explicitly recognizes "(...) The limited nature of more innovative entrepreneurship, based on opportunity or technology, is especially evident when comparing Portugal with more developed nations that have seen higher economic growth rates than the OECD average over recent years, such as, for instance, Ireland, Norway, Iceland and the USA" (p.57). These countries are characterized by high rates of new company formation resulting from the identification and exploitation of business opportunities in innovative and creative areas stimulated by a culturally and technologically rich environment. In recent years, culture has gradually begun to redefine its role within the context of the new economic development paradigm. Political sectors are beginning to perceive and recognize that culture plays a much bigger role than was previously perceived and found that the political, economical, financial and social reforms are much more likely to be successful if simultaneously they take into account the cultural perspective to meet the aspirations and concerns of society (Moura et al, 2015). This perception enhances the contribution of culture as a factor of cohesion to the process of relieving economic inequalities and tensions of social life.

In 2011, the export value of cultural goods was worth an estimate 64.7 million Euros, which represents an increase of 5.9% compared to the previous year. On the other hand, the value of imports of cultural goods totaled 174.9 million, down 21.4% from 2010.

As a result, there was a negative balance of €110.2 million. Central to the Art and Cultural Management course and within its main sphere of influence, the Alto Minho region is considered to have a great cultural development potential. The region has many key features, such as accessibility, unique natural landscapes, many cultural facilities and associations deeply rooted within the community, and a historical background and experience in the sector and in human skills development, in which the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo plays a vital role. In addition to the strong cultural and recreational associations, most of them dedicated to music, we also have amateur theatre groups and schools of artistic training at various levels.

### ***The Case of Festas da Senhora d'Agonia***

A pilot study has been developed in collaboration with Viana Festas, the Municipality of Viana do Castelo and De Montfort University in Leicester, United Kingdom, to evaluate the cultural, economic, social and environmental impact of "*Festas de Nossa Senhora D'Agonia*", one of the oldest and largest festivals held in Viana do Castelo, Portugal. One of the central aims of this project was to comprehend this festival and contribute to the local, regional and national cultural agenda through a new model of international cultural research and to promote cultural cooperation between researchers working in the art and cultural management sector from different countries. Since it was a preliminary study, it only focused on one aspect of the festival, the ethnographic procession held on Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2014, in order to test the proposed research methodology and explore the diversity and response of the audience at this event.

This pilot research project, that began in June 2014 and was completed with a report in January 2015 provided a greater understanding of how folk festivals can become more sustainable, and less dependent upon public sector funding, through identifying additional funding/income streams and partnerships that will strengthen its overall position within the cultural offer which is available at local, regional and national levels. Moreover, it also promoted contact with a range of existing and new stakeholders/beneficiaries and provided all parties with a deeper understanding of the benefits that results from the festival and importantly how these benefits can be developed in order to assist the festival in becoming more sustainable.

This project was coordinated by the Viana do Castelo Polytechnic and is part of a long-standing concern in the Art, Design & Humanities Area for cultural cooperation through the arts. Between 2008 and 2014 this Institution as well as some partner European Institutions were involved in another research projects, such as 'Images and Identity' (<http://www.image-identity.eu/>), and 'Creative Connections' (<http://creativeconnexions.eu/pt/>), exploring intercultural dialogue through the arts.

One of the major results of this project was the identification of the public's perception on the identity, activities, management and impact of this festival. The festival was perceived much more as a local and familiar festivity than as a national or international event. This was corroborated by the absence of information for a non-Portuguese speaking audience and the lack of diversity in terms of cultural offer.

The dimension of the audience was also measured and revealed that it had been largely over-estimated in the past, with clear impact in the economic potential of the event. In line with this observation, the project made an extensive analysis of the economic impact and gave new insights into possible improvements and new ways of exploring the economic, social and cultural potentials of the festival.

At a moment of political, economic and social transition in Portugal, "*Festas da Senhora d' Agonia*" are helping in the construction of an advanced society that understands art and culture as fundamental assets. Each year, this festival has demonstrated that creativity is one of Alto Minho's district greatest qualities and its impact is not limited to the field of culture, but also extends to the economic sector, thanks to a dynamic market.

### ***Methodology***

Public socio-cultural and economic data were collected on the 2014 edition of the historical-ethnographic procession of "*Festas da Senhora d' Agonia*", through the distribution of 489 questionnaires, available in three languages, including Portuguese, English and French, according to the language spoken by the respondent. The distribution of the questionnaires used a simple random sampling, and was homogeneous throughout the procession's route. The sample consisted of 46.8% of females and 53.2% males, aged mainly between 30 and 75 years.

The questionnaires were self-filled and distributed in paper form during the procession route and were later scanned and their data computerized by keypoint software. The descriptive statistical analysis was performed using the Microsoft Excel 2013 software, considering only the valid responses for each question.

An interview with the former president of the “Alto Minho” Tourism Board, Francisco Sampaio, was also conducted. This interview aimed at a more detailed understanding of the Festival, from the perspective of someone who has been directly involved in its organization over the past three decades. The interview was conducted in accordance with a script composed of seven questions.

In order to quantify the assistant public and assess the environmental impact in terms of air pollution were built two devices that allowed to collect, in real time, atmospheric temperature, the carbon monoxide concentration [CO] while taking aerial pictures High resolution.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The timing coincided with the realization then that current development models were predators of resources and natural ecosystems. The mobilization of world public opinion, governments and international bodies led to the creation of networks and organizations with high social participation and the so-called “*third sector*”. So, young people and new projects must be seen to encourage a view to strengthening the economy and sustainability. Despite the increasingly clear statement of needed self-sustaining cultural industries, there is a set of human activities whose value cannot be measured by market value, and that they must continue to be supported by the State. What is needed is to rigorously assess. A fundamental finding from previous research (Mateus, 2010) is the need to make an accurate assessment of the value of the Portuguese language and the role it can play in accelerating the export of our cultural activities. A major problem of the cultural sector, the report says, is to continue to be “*a guide to the internal market, without the idea that we should direct the activities to a wider market.*” So far none of this has been done. Many projects promoted by the academy, such as the International Forum of Cultural and Artistic Management (FIGAC 2015- <https://mobile.twitter.com/enriquevillalba/status/606084348727726081>), as it now stands, gave sustainability to the integral development of society. There is no measure that encourages the contribution of culture. Instead of continuing to provide financial support for activities that are in decline (for example, factories are not able to sustain jobs), we have to support culture and creativity.

One of the most urgent needs in terms of training cultural managers has to do with the methods and strategies used in assessing the levels of experience, understanding and knowledge that students should have of the arts and culture, as an *a priori* basis for determining relevant curriculum content, with the aims of contributing to the production of knowledge about the relationship between art and culture, improvements in the quality of arts management and the development of a critical perspective on art and culture.

The research questions posed at the start of this research project provided the framework for identifying the main concepts in this study and searching out relevant literature. Key texts about culture, art and international cooperation were reviewed in order to determine what is already known about this topic, how it conveys meanings, and values that contribute to the promotion of cultural cooperation, and ways this can be taught.

*Festas da Senhora d’ Agonia* was an innovative response to the need for publically funded cultural activities to demonstrate ‘value for money’, a requirement that has increased in importance as a result of the current economic crisis and the resultant pressure on public sector budgets. The project’s results have demonstrable benefit to public authorities, crafts makers and the wider artistic and business communities at local, regional and national levels. One of the key topics of the project was tourism and the extent to which the festival attracts cultural tourists and visitors from other parts of Portugal and Europe, in particular. It was proposed that the research would examine and therefore identify how the tourism potential could be developed through stronger partnerships between the festival, local business and other cultural attractions in the municipality and the wider region.

The outcomes of this research were of interest to other agencies too, thus dissemination of the results across Europe is an important goal. The research derived recommendations from the pilot study which can then be applied in 2016 and tested again in 2017. It is anticipated that the full research will be completed by 2018 and the research team have a commitment to follow the festival through to 2019. Dissemination will include presentations at selected conferences in Portugal and other European countries plus other academic outputs. All materials will also be made available on a website along with recommendations for developing further work in this emerging field of festival and event studies.

An important conclusion regarding this and other projects developed by teachers/researchers and finalist students of this BA is that they are encouraging the development of an enduring network between professionally minded cultural practitioners from region of Alto Minho and other national and international contexts, who support each other, their continuing professional development and their regions. An important legacy of these small scale researches will be a locally specific research framework and an actual database, a basis that will allow further and broader cultural research and development in the future.

The reinforcement of the valorization of the cultural and historical heritage with a economic view is a strategic priority for the creation of employment and good wealth, but it is also a concern regarding the preservation of intrinsic cultural values. Polytechnics in Portugal and, more specifically, the Higher Schools of Education that make up Polytechnics, are in a strong position to shape a culture in research development, particularly in the field of Arts Management, as the rules prohibiting these schools from providing masters courses have changed, and they are now encouraged to form partnerships with other institutions that allow the strengthening of such programmes at undergraduate and MA levels. Collaboration with De Montfort University and other European Higher Education Institutions, can have implications for national and international cultural policies and practices and foster a culture of research in the field of cultural management. It is expected that this small scale research will further advance the sustainable and comprehensive development and emphasize the importance of international cultural cooperation which shall be open to institutional decentralization and development of networks.

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