

ADVERTISING ADULT EDUCATION OFFERINGS IN A PORTUGUESE QUALIFICA CENTRE USING SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS

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ABSTRACT: In the context of adult education, Qualifica Centres throughout Portugal are responsible for the dissemination of adult education pathways available to adult learners. There is a huge variety of dissemination tools. Leaflets, informational notes in the region's newspapers, establishment of partnerships, advertising spots on the radio, and the use of social networks are some of the methods used by centres. This paper on good practices outlines the advertising efforts made by the Qualifica Centre of Azambuja using social networking, specifically the centre's Facebook account, and their results.

1. General framework

The Qualifica Centre of the public school of Azambuja is a Portuguese adult education provider.

The centre is located in the town of Azambuja, in the suburban area of the district of Lisbon, and covers the municipalities of Azambuja, Alenquer, and Cartaxo. However, at the end of 2016, the two latter counties were given their own Qualifica Centres, operated by public providers. By 2011, the municipality of Azambuja had 21,814 registered inhabitants.

In terms of economic activity, according to the National Institute of Statistics, in 2011 the distribution of the employed population was as follows: 3.7 per cent worked in the primary sector (involving extraction and/or production of raw materials), 25.3 per cent in the secondary sector (involving the transformation of raw materials into goods), and 71 per cent in the tertiary sector (involving providing services to consumers and businesses).

The most relevant economic activity sectors by volume of business are wholesale and retail, manufacturing, transport and warehousing, administrative and support services, and accommodation and catering. As for the existing needs of qualification, 9.3 per cent of the population of Azambuja have no basic schooling, 57.5 per cent of the population have a basic level of education, and 18.6 per cent have a secondary education degree.

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Geraldine Silva, *Advertising Adult Education Offerings in a Portuguese Qualifica Centre using Social Networking Tools*, pp. 183-190, © 2020 Author(s), CC BY 4.0 International, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-155-6.12, in Regina Egetenmeyer, Vanna Boffo, Stefanie Kröner (edited by), *International and Comparative Studies in Adult and Continuing Education*, © 2020 Author(s), content CC BY 4.0 International, metadata CCO 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISSN 2704-5781 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-155-6 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-155-6

The low levels of qualification that exist in the area reinforce the need for the secondary school of Azambuja to be an adult education provider with the existence of a Qualifica Centre in the school's facilities.

Concerning professional fields, as stated in the internal annual report of Azambuja's Qualifica Centre, the need to provide for the qualification of the active population is even more evident. Qualification needs are evident in areas such as logistics, commerce, electricity and energy, hospitality, and catering, directly related to the most relevant sectors of economic activity in the region and in transversal areas of emerging importance such as audiovisuals and multimedia production and social work and guidance.

Created by Decree no. 232/2016 of the Ministry of Education and Labour, Solidarity, and Social Security, the Qualifica Centre of the secondary school of Azambuja began its activity in mid-October of 2016. The adult education centre transitioned from a Centre for Qualification and Vocational Training to a Qualifica Centre, offering the population the following training and qualification pathways, whose information is available on the website of the National Agency for the Qualification and Vocational Training:

- Processes of recognition, validation, and certification of competences at a basic and secondary school level, consisting in recognition of prior learning.
- Processes of recognition, validation, and certification of basic and secondary vocational skills in the areas of logistics and commerce.
- Adult education and training courses (EFA courses) for the primary and secondary level, aiming at a school certification.
- Certified modular courses in cooperation with private training providers.

The Qualifica Centre of Azambuja requires the following human resources: one coordinator, two technicians for the orientation, recognition, and validation of competences, and a team of trainers who are teachers at the basic and secondary school of Azambuja.

This centre is intended for all those seeking a qualification, with a view to continuing their education and/or transitioning to the labour market, namely young adults aged 18 or over and adults from the age of 23 onwards.

One of the major goals continues to be the will to contribute to the upskilling of Azambuja's qualification level, both by guiding young adults to a more adequate and conscious training and by offering adults the most adequate training according to their profile and needs.

Our action does not focus on a target audience with very specific characteristics. However, so far, many of the individuals who have enrolled in our centre are young people between the ages of 18 and 23 and

adults with no secondary education completed, or workers with precarious employment contracts.

2. Challenges

The Centres for Qualification and Vocational Training and Qualifica Centres benefit from funding from the European Social Fund through an application to the Operational Human Capital Programme.

In order to monitor the degree of execution of the contracted goals, the Centre for Qualification and Vocational Training and Qualifica Centres are responsible for fully registering the entire centre's activity in the Integrated Information and Management System for Educational and Training Pathways platform. This consists of a digital programme coordinated by the General Directorate of Statistics of Education and Science for the management of the network of educational and training offers of young and adult trajectories.

In the last monitoring report of the Azambuja School's Centre for Qualification and Vocational Training, the following execution data were verified:

Table 1 – Performance of Azambuja Centre for Qualification and Vocational Training from October 2015 to December 2016. [Source: Integrated Information and Management System for Educational and Training Pathways platform]

Approved goals for 2016		Achieved results in 2016	
enrolment	certification	enrolment	certifications
498	64	54	16

Table 1 shows that enrolments were much lower than required, with only 54 enrolments in the centre and 16 certifications issued in processes of recognition and validation of competencies.

Nevertheless, during that period from October 2015 to December 2016, an effort was made by the Centre for Qualification and Vocational Training team to promote the centre and its qualification programmes among the adult population as follows:

- information about the centre was displayed in the facilities of the secondary school;
- a brochure featuring adult courses and trainings was handed to parents during school meetings with their children's teachers;
- promotional leaflets were distributed in the town of Azambuja and local businesses, as well as major companies in the residential area;
- the centre and its offerings were presented at a city hall meeting;

- informal and formal collaboration agreements were established with companies and other training providers.

In terms of public advertisement, the Centre for Qualification and Vocational Training and Qualifica Centres did not benefit from the same amount of advertising as the previous national programme of adult education, known as the New Opportunities Initiative. Nevertheless, in April 2017, the Portuguese National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Training (ANQEP) made efforts to publicise the Qualifica Centres using television and radio spots.

Internally, the Qualifica Centre of Azambuja felt the need to increase the number of enrolments due to the new Operational Human Capital Program application (2017–2020), in which a compromise to attain 400 enrolments per year was made. But one problem persisted: How to get adults interested in enrolling in our centre? We believed that the advertising investment made by the National Agency was extremely important to raise awareness of the programme among the population, but we doubted it would be enough on its own to encourage adults in the area of Azambuja to enrol in our centre in substantial numbers.

3. Implementation of the good practice

On 20 January 2017, I was given permission as an orientation, recognition, and validation of competencies technician to create an informal Facebook page to advertise both the activities and course offerings of our Qualifica Centre. From January 2017 until 31 December 2018, I was in charge of project implementation, including the creation and management/revision of posted contents. The page contained general information such as our address, contacts, centre staff, and other features.

The main goal was to increase the number of adults enrolled by advertising our centre and the outcomes of our work (e.g. school certifications) using adults' testimonies and pictures of certified adults.

Invitations to follow the page were sent to users from the area of Azambuja. The page currently has 3,800 followers. Our target group were adults residing in Azambuja and surroundings, as well as commercial establishments or pages of civil society associations based in the county.

In early 2017, our activity focused on disseminating publications about the centre and our activities: "What is a Qualifica Centre? Who can benefit from it? What is the centre's schedule and contacts? Which pathways are offered for adults? How can people enrol? When will the courses begin?" All of our courses are free of charge— a fact that was also important to highlight.

In mid-2017, we proceeded to post pictures of adults (with their consent) on the day of their certification. We wanted to show that people known in and around Azambuja attended and completed their schooling in our centre. We believed that other people could be motivated to enrol in our centre by recognising people they know in our publications.

It was also a very good way to advertise our centre, because acquaintances of adults that concluded the basic or secondary level of education would share the publications on their own Facebook pages. The publications would be seen by even more people, allowing friends and family to comment and share the images.

Towards the second half of 2017, in addition to publicising the adult education pathways available at the Azambuja centre, such as EFA courses and processes of recognition, validation, and certification of competencies, as well as pictures of certifications, we expanded the range of courses for adults, co-organising certified modular trainings for active adults, with qualifications above the sixth year of schooling.

These courses were widely advertised on our Facebook page and were very much appreciated by adults residing in the Azambuja area who held a university degree and wanted to attend short courses to improve language or ICT skills.

The main partners were private, external training centres, with the possibility of providing certified training on an itinerant basis, to whom we proposed a cooperation protocol. While our centre advertised the training, created the schedule, and formed the classes (by registering participants in the Integrated Information and Management System for Educational and Training Pathways platform and collecting the necessary documents for registration), the training entity provided the training in our facilities and also issued the certificates.

The first publication advertising a certified modular training in our centre was released on 4 October 2017. This publication advertised a 50-hour English course (beginners).

Between 15 January 2018 and 28 November 2018, several short-term courses administered in our facilities were advertised, namely Spanish (beginners), Spanish (advanced), Excel advanced functionalities, English (beginners), English (advanced), German (beginners), Chinese (beginners), multimedia content development, and first aid training.

These trainings were organised based on adults' general interests in various fields of training, as expressed in their responses to a questionnaire made available on our Facebook page prior to registration.

Following the announcement of the courses, we explained how to enrol in the centre, namely by asking adults to provide documents to register all the data in the Integrated Information and Management System for Educational and Training Pathways, and formed the training groups.

Some challenges were encountered in terms of managing the social media page; specifically, the need to carefully manage the page so that the institutional aspect of the content would not get lost, and the need for continuously verifying the page's contents in response to the very frequent interaction of followers, who requested an almost immediate response to questions and comments, seven days a week. As a result, there was a need to reorganize my work as a technician to be able to manage the site without neglecting the orientation, validation, and certification processes.

4. Outcomes of the good practice

The Qualifica Centre of Azambuja benefited from both our internal advertisement and the public advertisement by the National Agency. In April 2017, the Portuguese National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Training advertised the Qualifica Centres using a series of radio and television spots, thereby raising awareness of the existence of the centres and the added value of the qualification.

Internally, the social media account, especially designed for adult learners and created to target the adult population of Azambuja and the surrounding area (people over 18 years old), was a success based on the proximity established with the population of Azambuja and the virtual and personal interactions that produced numerous enrolments. We had very quick and direct feedback: when adults enrolled in our centre or called our facilities, they would mostly refer to the contents published on our Facebook page.

Since all the entries in the Qualifica Centre are registered in the Integrated Information and Management System for Educational and Training Pathways, we verified the following: from 1 January 2017 to 30 November 2017, 146 adults enrolled in our centre, of whom 77 were referred to processes of recognition, validation, and certification of competencies, and 74 to other training offerings (EFA and certified modular training, for example). As one can verify in the section "Achieved results for 2017" of Table 2.

Table 2 – Performance of Azambuja Qualifica Centre from January to December 2017. [Source: Integrated Information and Management System for Educational and Training Pathways platform]

enrol- ments	Approved goals for 2017				enrol- ments	Achieved results for 2017			
	total referrals	referrals to other offers	referrals to rec- ognition of prior learning	certifi- cations		total referrals	referrals to other offers	referrals to rec- ognition of prior learning	certifi- cations
400	360	144	216	86	146	151	74	77	29

Concerning total referrals, we achieved 151 referrals in 2017, exceeding the number of enrolments. This is due to the fact that in 2017 we also completed the referral of adults enrolled the year before.

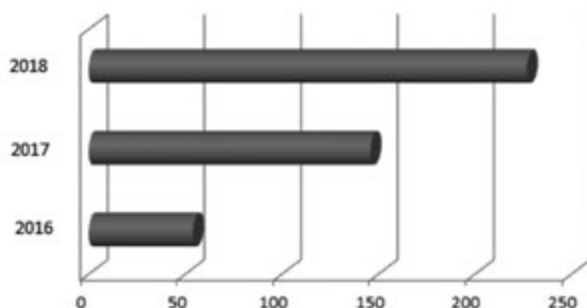
The year 2018 was a period of greater co-organisation and dissemination of modular certified training, advertised in our social network. From 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2018, the Qualifica Centre of Azambuja presented a total of 227 enrolled adults, 47 of whom were referred to recognition, validation, and certification of competencies processes and 155 were referred to other offers (EFA, short term courses, etc - as see in Table 3).

Table 3 – Performance of Azambuja Qualifica Centre in the period from January to December of 2018. [Source: Integrated Information and Management System for Educational and Training Pathways platform]

Approved goals for 2018					Achieved results for 2018				
enrol- ments	total referrals	referrals to other offers	referrals to rec- ognition of prior learning	certifi- cations	enrol- ments	total referrals	referrals to other offers	referrals to rec- ognition of prior learning	certifi- cations
400	360	144	216	86	227	202	155	47	37

Therefore, according to Figure 1, an upward trend in terms of enrolments can be observed.

Figure 1 – Enrolments per year in Azambuja Qualifica Centre in the period from 2016 to 2018. [Source: Integrated Information and Management System for Educational and Training Pathways platform]



In conclusion, advertising our Qualifica Centre via a social networking page was a good practice because it allowed us to establish easier interactions and proximity with Azambuja’s adult population and promoted a greater diffusion of our pathways in an inexpensive manner. It allowed for constant updates and almost immediate feedback concerning our offerings, enrolments, and so forth.

It also allowed for responding more immediately to online requests for clarification and doubts, and for scheduling meetings and interviews with adults reluctant to take the initiative to approach or centre to ask those first questions in person. It allowed for mobilising adults who previously were not interested in participating in continuous training.

In summary, we proved the usefulness of creating a social media page to advertise adult education courses and training programmes. By doing so, we were able to reach new users of social media, who regardless of their age are more and more connected to the online world.

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