

PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING: CERTIFICATION AND ACCREDITATION OF SKILLS ACQUIRED IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL CONTEXTS

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Abstract: *C.A.P. is a service of the University of Bari to promote lifelong learning, certification and accreditation of skills acquired in formal and informal contexts. It is open to all EU and non-EU citizens and its mission is the enhancement of the " cultural capital " as a fundamental and strategic asset for humanity. Main goals: the recognition and certification of soft skills; the recognition of prior learning " on the job " and their translation into professional qualifications and/or CFU expendable in university course; the promotion of equivalence or recognition of training credits for EU and non-EU citizens. It offers financial support for refugees students and operates through networking with institutional and University representatives involved on the issues in question. By this, the Cap enhances lifelong learning, including skills developed both during structured and legally recognized educational, learning and training activities (prior learning) or through informal and often unintentional learning experiences (experiential learning). Specifically, the certification of the skills acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts gives every citizen the opportunity to provide proof of the skills acquired throughout his life, regardless of the context where they were developed. There are many potential beneficiaries of the proposed services: not only refugees students and researchers but also the University of Bari and the social system in general: the recognition and enhancement of the skills acquired in different contexts, constitute an important point of reference for social integration policies and a bridge between education/training systems and the labor market.*

Keywords: *learning; certification; skills; informal; refugees*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Center for lifelong learning (CAP) was created in 2012 at the University of Bari (Italy, Puglia Region) and funded by the European Fund for the Integration of non-EU immigrants (EIF). Following the participation to these research programmes, the service has developed a very specific know-how concretely addressed to promote the following activities:

- Prior learning identification: recognition of prior learning in terms of competences linked to a standard that can be accredited;
- Assessment: gathering of evidence on previous qualifications and experiences (both formal and non-formal) to apply for recognition by a national or regional body responsible for awarding credits or recognizing the positive outcomes of CAP assessment.

The work of the CAP also included the development of a proposal for a unitary University service for the recognition of equivalence of

foreign academic qualifications. Indeed, a University degree legally recognized as equivalent to a similar Italian qualification helps provide weight to a curriculum vitae, as well as enable the obtainment of specific professional postgraduate skills and qualifications. At the University of Bari there is no specific orientation service, nor a unified procedure for the recognition of the equivalence of foreign academic qualifications. Italian universities, due to their autonomous status, evaluate foreign academic qualifications through the application of Articles 2 and 3 of Law 148/02 (and, therefore, the Lisbon Convention) to grant analogous Italian qualifications. The availability of such services for the recognition of equivalence within Italian universities is somewhat uneven, as evidenced by the testimonies received from non-EU citizens who have made use of the CAP.

As a form of career guidance, the service offered by CAP aimed at helping an individual actively shape his/her life course in terms of development and the implementation of a personal

career plan. Indeed, the main objective of the CAP service was that of assisting immigrants to develop a personal process of social emancipation by enhancing personal skills, reflectivity and decision-making capabilities. Therefore, some preliminary results coming from this experimentation of CAP services are presented in the paper, highlighting its outputs (number and profiling of immigrant users), outcomes (effect on the need for career guidance, prior learning accreditation, job creation) and its intermediate mechanisms (how the service works in generating output and outcomes).

2. ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN EUROPE AND ITALY

The Italian education and training system and vocational and continuing training, is currently undergoing a remarkable process of reform. Based on some of the most recent agreements between the government and the social partners (1993; 1996; 2001; 2002-2005), the outline of a more comprehensive and national Italian system can be detected. This is particularly clear in the law on “promotion of employment” (Treu Law 1996-97), in which the basic principles of a (vocational) lifelong learning system are described. The 1996-97 law introduces the principle that competences can be certified irrespective of the way in which they were acquired. Competences acquired through work should be assessed and potentially recognised in the same way as competences acquired through formal training institutions. In this vein, the Italian Ministry of Employment in 2003 made a further step ahead with the promulgation of the “citizen training portfolio” (*libretto formativo del cittadino*), a personal portfolio where all formally and informally acquired experiences and competences in the course of life during continuing education and internships are registered and certified by regional institutions as also advocated by the European Union. To date this certification tool has been tested in 13 Italian regions and is still developing in many others.

In 2006 the Italian Ministry of Employment also promoted a national table for the discussion of professional standards of certification in order to define a common national qualification framework. Since 2010 many regions have adopted these standards and some others are still working in this direction. Most recently, in 2012, the reformation of the Italian labour market (Legge Fornero) generated further discussion on continuing education and certification by

providing important contributions towards developing a coherent model of validation.

Italian efforts to develop a certification model and a concrete procedure can be resumed in a combination of measures: a modular system of training, a system of training credits and tailored assessment and certification procedures. The aim is to integrate and interconnect the various systems (initial vocational education and training and continuing vocational training) and achieve “a personalisation” of learning routes. Tools developed to achieve such aims include an “individual training record book” (which can be combined with formal certificates to form a portfolio), and a “skills audit”, not based on one centralised model applied throughout the entire country, but differs per the various regions. Though still at an early stage of implementation, certain tensions have already occurred. If a “personalisation of learning routes” is to be successful, procedures and methodologies for assessment and recognition of competences are of crucial importance. The question of who is going to measure what, with the help of which methodologies, is at the core of current reforms, while various stakeholder groups (school, employers, employees) cautiously observe initiatives and progress.

Undoubtedly, many key issues remain to be solved. Firstly, there is a predominance of academic content and curricula in the proposed assessment procedures. This raises issues in the treatment of non-formal learning elements (e.g. from the workplace), in a fair and valid way. As long as assessments are exclusively based on reference points defined within a formal system, learning experiences following a different logic and leading to different content (for example based on work experience) can easily be overlooked or paid little attention.

A further weakness is represented by the lack of clear-cut definitions/regulations of the tools in question, and moreover, the lack of a system of national standards to promote consistent and comparable practices. While being the most significant obstacle to reliable and valid assessments, the lack of a national standard is not the only obstacle to be dealt with.

An ultimate, yet highly significant obstacle is the difficulty in involving Italian entrepreneurs in the discussion on the relevance of formal and informal learning certification. Therefore, although recognized as a priority, Italian managers often doubt the practices and methodologies as well as those involved in awarding certification, believing that allowing competences to be measured in such

a way can lead to their mismanagement and misuse. Therefore, a common framework balancing the interests of the individual and the enterprise is still necessary in Italy.

Finally, the Italian situation is partly contradictory. On the one hand, there is clear development in the direction of a competence-based system for education and training, where various learning pathways, both internally and externally to formal training institutions, can lead to formal qualifications. On the other hand, there are still several practical/economic obstacles as well as of a more general nature. The lack of a national reference point (standard) clearly belongs to the second category and future developments must in some way provide an answer to this challenge.

2.1 From theory to (good) practice. Moving from the premises above, within the two programmes, funded by the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals 2007-2013 and carried out in 2012 and 2014, the CAP Centre for Lifelong Learning initiated the study and experimentation of new services for the validation of informal learning and recognition of qualifications acquired by immigrants in their country of origin.

Through experimentation the activities of the CAP resulted in a free support service for preparatory work of the recognition of qualifications and/or credits already acquired by non-EU citizens in their country of origin, as well as a service for the transparency of learning acquired in informal and non-formal settings within previous work experience. More specifically, the services provided by the CAP intended to meet the needs of:

- Information and guidance on the recognition of previously acquired qualifications for the purpose of study and/or work;
- The evaluation (self/hetero-evaluation) of soft skills acquired in informal and non-formal settings useful for inclusion in the labour market;
- The development of transparency of professional learning informally acquired *on the job* and their translation into CFUs, possibly redeemable in university courses.

In operational terms, the CAP developed a consultancy procedure divided into three phases, generally relating to three meetings with the user.

- *Phase 1 - Pre-diagnostics:* The first phase involved initial contact and welcome. During this time, the operator carried out a preliminary screening of user motivations in order to direct them towards a specific functional consultancy

service. Through a registration card developed ad hoc, having identified the specific needs expressed by the user, the operator began consultancy with the signing of a consultancy agreement. During this phase information was gathered to produce an initial profile of the life experience and professional training of the candidate.

- *Phase 2 – Diagnostics:* Following the initial screening, the user had the opportunity to take advantage of a process of analysis of *soft skills* acquired through previous informal learning and/or professional experiences, useful in the process of an active job search. In this phase, divided into two sessions, they were offered two assessment tools. Both were built specifically with particular reference to the objectives of consultation. Such tools are inspired by the “Big Five” theoretical model, widely used in the practice of recruitment and psychological assessment in organizational contexts to assess professional personality. As part of the planned project, the dimensions under analysis included: intellectual effectiveness (problem solving and decision making); realization effectiveness (systemic vision, initiative/dynamism and leadership); relational effectiveness (empathy, cooperation, use of such relationships); uncertainty management (stress tolerance, control, independence of judgment); process and resource management (planning/organization, goal orientation, conscientiousness).

In order to implement the reliability of this first phase of evaluation, users had the opportunity at a later meeting to participate in a group assessment as an opportunity for a hetero-evaluation of the same areas of expertise. Through a leaderless group discussion, a group discussion technique without a leader defined a priori widely used in the context of assessment and training, a group of 6/8 users was created in order to discuss a case, also created ad hoc, which required decision-making within an hour. The discussion of a case was obviously a pretext to observe group dynamics and the emergence of “spontaneous” areas of expertise as described above.

The output of these two evaluation phases was the result of the weighted average of scores which allowed for developing the skills profile of the user.

- *Phase 3 - Final phase:* A feedback meeting was held in the final phase in order to provide results of the pathway to the user, summarized in a *skills folder*, which is a final summary dossier on strengths/ weaknesses, useful to support the user in the definition of a life plan for education and/or professional training, its phases and operational strategies.

2.3. Preliminary results of the experimentation. During this experimentation, the CAP advisory path has been concluded for 229 immigrants coming from different parts of the Apulia Region, 109 contacted in Bari, 26 in Lecce and 94 in Foggia. Among them 66 were women and 166 men, aged between 16 and 35, coming from the most different parts of the world, working and living in our country, sometimes for emancipation reasons, for study reasons and even for most tragic family events. The cultural capital of those people is medium-high: they often have a degree and a master, though largely misrecognized by the Italian learning system. Among the 229 people only 33 attended elementary school, 39 middle school and 98 high school, 57 have a degree and 2 a phd. They mostly come from Pakistan, Georgia, Albania, Nigeria and Bangladesh.

Another goal of the service has been the possibility for 102 people to start a certification process of the soft skills (e.g. communication, team work, decision making, etc.) acquired through prior learning and working experience even in informal settings. They have concretely participated to self and group assessment sessions, taking to the definition of a professional profile that for most of them has been useful in job search.

3. CONCLUSIONS & ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The experimentation carried on within these two projects has made possible the realization of important outputs that have contributed to implement the activities of recognition and certification of prior learning in formal, informal and non-formal settings, extending it to a larger population of citizens not only belonging to the category of migrants.

In particular, in relation to the service offered by the CAP helpdesk of assistance in the gathering of information and the initiation of procedures for recognition of learning acquired in formal settings, experimentation has led to a *handbook on the legal recognition of academic qualifications for citizens from outside the EU*, which provides a summary of the procedures to be followed in the event that the user is resident abroad and about to commence residence in Italy or is already resident in Italy with a regular residence permit and seeking recognition for qualifications formally acquired in the country of origin in order to continue with their studies in Italy.

The second significant output resulting from the work of testing relates to the *setting up a*

unitary university Lifelong Learning service, useful in supporting not only the immigrant population but also a wider range of users, in the recognition of prior learning in non-formal and informal settings. The transparency of these skills, through both self and hetero evaluation tests, can be finalized with a view to job placement including the definition of methods of active job searching with a greater awareness of their own resources but, above all, the enhancement of knowledge acquired *on the job* that can then result in the recognition of university credits, potentially redeemable on training at the University of Bari. The possibility of establishing a unitary university service for the development of a Lifelong Learning culture, which will result in the enhancement of a more articulate definition of skills, not only as practical experience or theoretical knowledge, but how the two components may be integrated, is certainly an indicator of modernization at the University.

This clearly connects one of the most significant outputs of the project: the definition of a memorandum of understanding between departments including the Department of Youth and Social Citizenship (Immigration Office) and the Department of Training and Education - Schools, Universities, Vocational Training (the Vocational Training Service of the Puglia Region) in the dissemination, development, promotion and coordination of services for the certification of learning developed in non-formal and informal settings, acquired by migrant citizens in their countries of origin.

This protocol aims to gather the considerations previously outlined and lay the foundations for fruitful collaboration and coordination with regard to certification and, above all, with reference to the work of establishing a Regional System of Competencies (Law DGR no. 2273 of 13 November 2012) and the definition of a Regional Repertoire of Professional Figures (Law DGR no. 1277 of 2 December 2013). This step is undoubtedly a crucial step in the pathway proposed by the CAP in terms of developing the transparency of skills acquired *on the job*, difficult to certify in terms of formal qualifications acquired, but valuable for the recognition of professional qualifications. The implications of this evidence can be seen both in relation to the actions of active job searching but also in relation to the previously discussed possibility of the translation of specific skills into university training credits which the regional repertoire could then help in terms of placement in very specific sectors.

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