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Recognition and Validation of prior learning in Italy: strategies, practices, perspectives

Carlo Terzaroli

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1. Introduction

1.1 What are competences?

Starting with a concept question is very important to understand what we are talking about. Competences are the base of the concept of Lifelong Learning and they have been defined by the *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning* as

“a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context. Key competences are those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment.” (EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2006, p. 13).

So competences have been thought as the key to face new global challenges and to future development. The same document in fact says:

“As globalisation continues to confront the European Union with new challenges, each citizen will need a wide range of key competences to adapt flexibly to a rapidly changing and highly interconnected world.” (EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2006, p. 13).

Competences come from school and formal learning, but they develop in non-formal and informal context as workplaces, association, relationships, daily life and so on. In this framework institutional governments and stakeholders invested more and more on recognition and validation of these learning outcomes: in fact they are primary to face current critical and to be competitive in the future.

During last years Italy started developing reflections and strategies on Lifelong Learning, experiencing at regional and local levels practices of validation of learning outcomes. Institutional actors involved in this process are: the national level, which operates on a political and conceptual point of view; regional level, which operates on a strategic level (elaboration of system and policies) and on a technical and operational level (with experiments and projects).

1.2 Structure of this work and research methods

I started my research from the *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning* to understand how and when competences were born in Europe. After that I studied Lifelong Learning Programme on some essays to point out, besides the data, the perspectives of this strategy and its challenges. I based a lot of my study on the ISFOL¹ document *Validazione delle competenze da esperienza: approcci e pratiche in Italia e*

¹ ISFOL: Istituto per lo Sviluppo e la Formazione Professionale dei Lavoratori – Institute for the development and professional formation of workers

in Europa (ISFOL, 2012) which explain the Italian and European context and compare Italian system to European guidelines facing to concrete experiences.

For this research my work starts from national level in second chapter: I want to explain national policies and Ministries laws, and to point out limits of this level of intervention.

In the third chapter I will talk about regional level, which is the real and concrete level to influence practices of recognition and validation of learning outcomes: I'll introduce the regional system of Emilia Romagna, Toscana and Lombardia because they are the best practices in Italian system.

Moreover in the fourth chapter I will present some experiences of recognition and validation of learning outcomes. I'll start from the European strategies and its application in our country and after that I'll display some practices in companies and in non-profit organizations.

2. National policies in Italy

In Italy institutions and social actors agree on importance of Recognition of Prior Learning in non-formal and informal contexts. Nevertheless they have not developed strategies and programmes for the institutionalization of a national system of RPL yet. As a matter of fact there are traditional difficulties in Italian labour policies that impede the achievement of this target. These hurdles are:

- the legal value of formal education;
- the traditional weakness of continuing education and adult education (which is not structured and widespread as in other European countries);
- the lack of a unitary national qualification framework (although there are different types of systems at regional level);
- the large number of institutions involved in these policies at national, regional and local level. (ISFOL, 2012, p. 83)

In these years national and regional institutions (the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour and Welfare, social actors and associations) tried sometimes to find a set of standards to share and conform regional practices of RPL and to promote new policies of non-formal and informal learning outcomes validation. However now we can observe that complete systems have been implemented only at regional level, as we could see in next chapters.

So, what are difficulties of national level? Why in last decades has not been Italy able to build a national system? I'll try to explain it with a brief summary of the stages of the last 15 years:

- In 1996/1997 with the “Accordo per il lavoro” (Agreement for Labour) and Treu’s law, Italy understood the importance of a national system of certification of competences and the national level tried to manage some agreements with regions and social actors. This process, which today appears precursor of the European debate, culminated in an important Decree-Law in 2001(n. 174/2001), which ruled the conditions of certifications of competences learned at work.

- The Decree 174/2001 tried to fix the rules of this system, but it remained almost entirely unrealized. It gave many suggestions for some agreements State-Regions from 2002 to 2005 about vocational training. The most important strategy concerns the “Libretto Formativo del Cittadino” (a competences booklet which is considered the beginning of the development of a national system of competences validation). Unfortunately this strategy has been implemented only in Tuscany and only in these years will start in other regions.

- Only in 2006 the Ministry of Labour started a project to define and implement a National Qualification Framework according to European guidelines. The project involved all public and social actors and produced: an articulation of different economical and professional areas; a definition of standards of competences and qualification; a methodological reflection on construction of national professional standards, which has been experienced in tourism and mechanical engineering.

- From 2008 and the beginning of economic crisis, national institutions renewed the aim to invest in RPL: in fact globalization and new economic paradigms need new and flexible competences for workers in labour market. For this reason the development of new competences has become a priority for Italian government. In this perspective there are some government documents such as the “Libro bianco” of the Ministry of Labour, published in 2009, which declare the importance of non-formal and informal learnings on workplace and fix the necessity to build a national system of competences validation; the “Italia 2020” Document, an action plan to develop youth employment through work and learning, which tries to match workers’ competences and labour market needs, with a specific priority to recognition and validation of learning outcomes.

We can observe, in the end, that recognition and validation of prior learning have not an implemented form at national level. There are some projects and strategies as we have just seen, but they didn’t reach the implementation stage. Only at regional level we can find out institutionalized system and I’ll try to show that in the third chapter of this paper.

3. Regional policies in Italy

In last two years all Italian regions developed actions, with discontinuous levels of success, to guarantee all citizens lifelong learning. Programmes have in order to develop new professionalization in labour market and to improve competences learned in non-formal and informal situations.

Nevertheless the development of RPL has different level from a region to another one: in fact most of regions in the south and in the centre of Italy have not an organized system, but recognition and validation of prior learning is applied only in specific projects. There are instead three leader regions in the field of recognition and validation of prior learning, with institutionalized and implemented strategies. These regions are Toscana, Emilia Romagna and Lombardia: I'll shortly explain each system in this chapter.

3.1 Emilia Romagna

The regional government of Emilia Romagna (in the north of Italy) has worked for many years for a validation system of competences characterized by transparency and accessibility in collaboration with social actors and local governments. The first idea of this system started in 1992, with a regional law which tried to define the competences examination in order to vocational training. In 2006 then the regional system was extended to non-formal and informal learning outcomes, with references to a “SRQ – Sistema Regionale delle Qualifiche” (Regional Qualification System).

The interesting fact of this regional experience regards the collaboration between public and private actors: as a matter of fact the system, after a initially period of experimentation, has been voluntarily used by private companies. Emilia Romagna is a region with high public function of economic governance and a close collaboration between public and private actors, which is known all over the nation as Emilia Romagna Model.

So the Emilia Romagna system has the characteristic to be represented by association well-known in all local places, the quickness of access to a competences validation process and the capillarity of institutions in the regional territory (employment centres, third sector companies, no-profit organization). With this principles the Emilia Romagna region has implemented a validation system based on: civic values, particularly individual rights (which ask voluntary participation) and social rights (which push the government to ensure the access to the largest number of people); transparency and credibility, to ensure a validation process which evidence the effective subject of the subject.

These results were possible thanks to the SRQ standard which is a common reference for different local and sectorial systems and for the link between enterprises and

learning systems. But the really successful reason of Emilia Romagna system is the concerted approach which includes all actors at all levels.

3.2 Toscana

The regional competences validation system of Toscana (in the north of Italy) region took inspiration by the European challenge for a lifelong learning programme for the knowledge society. The government in fact started implementing a transformation of vocational training and education towards a competences development for each citizen: the regional law 32/2002 defined the new integrated system, based on the protection of the right of learning (ISFOL, 2012, p. 116).

Starting from this principle the regional government wrote a “Repertorio delle Figure Professionali” (Directory of Professionals): this process was shared with the other local institutions and with the productive and social stakeholders. This process found application in the employment centres network, which are today the most important actors for employment policies. A relevant factor of this process is the parallel development of a technological information system able to manage lots of data and web course, offering companies and citizens a vocational training online (for example TRIO platform and IDOL).

The other important aspect of Toscana regional system is its role on the international scene of competences validation. As a matter of fact Toscana government promoted the interregional dialogue on these themes, sharing good practices and experiences, creating the EARLALL (European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning), which develops an European Lifelong Learning network based on good regional experiences.

3.3 Lombardia

Another good experience in Italy is represented by Lombardia, the most productive region in the state situated in the north. This regional system invested lots of resources in recognition and validation of non-formal learning outcomes since 2008.

The governance of the process is managed by regional government with the other stakeholders which invest money, competences and socio-economic opportunities for the territory. The real interesting fact concerns the partnership with the University of Milan “Politecnico”, which defined the guide lines and coordinated the validation process phases during the first experimentation.

The Lombardia system is based on specific values, in connection with the high productive sensibility of this region. The investment in human capital is very important in the RPL system, with the awareness that only forming and educating workers the enterprise could grow up and find new markets. The other aspect of this system is

represented by a strong attention towards competences development for workers' mobility: this fact showed also the European perspective of RPL and of productive system of this region.

4. Experiences of RPL in Italy

In this chapter I will shortly show the most important Italian experience in the field of recognition and validation of prior learning. The aim is to analyse different application of regional and national policies principles.

4.1 "Leonardo da Vinci" Programme

The European "Leonardo da Vinci" Programme, established in 1994 and from 2007 inserted into LLP as a specific programme for education and vocational training, has been one of the most important tool for the development of new professions and new competences. In this programme the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes has been primary and it evolved in every new projects during years.

Even though the "Leonardo da Vinci" Programme has had a good relevance in Italy during these years (349 projects from 2000 to 2010), RPL didn't have a lot of relevance: as a matter of fact only 47 project in this decade regarded these themes.

With new programmes 2007-2013 and the new attention of EC towards innovation, the focus has been moved from competences valorisation to effective recognition and validation of them. In last seven years in fact Italy has developed new tools and methods to put out non-formal and informal learning outcomes more than in the first decade of 2000's, and above all new software to manage competences and human capital.

4.2 Workers' mobility

The European occupational framework is continually on the move. More and more young workers, during the phase of entry in the labour market or after some years, take into account the possibility to move themselves in another country for a period. With EU Lifelong Learning Programmes (particularly Erasmus Programme) mobility changed in last two decades from the point of view of emigration to a professionalization experience which could give relevance to the *curriculum vitae*. It is a cultural change promoted by EC to face the challenge of globalisation and global labour market.

Already in a 2006 Eurobarometer survey the 76% of people interviewed thought that a stable job for life is a passed thing and the 88% thought that Lifelong Learning improves possibilities to quickly find a job. (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2007). This awareness has grown up with economic crisis of 2008, but at the same time the instance of more security and social protection became very strong. For these reasons in “Europa 2020” Strategy the main objective of EC is to offer new competences and new qualification to frequently change job and to be growing career. Flexicurity strategies could help European labour market to become more modern and to better face challenges, with a particular attention to social needs of people without a job. It’s a hard work, but this is the way to maintain Europe competitive towards Asia and South America.

In this field Italy lags a lot. During last year students who participate to Erasmus programme improved of 6% (23.400 out of 250.000 students) but the labour laws and system have to be improved to create easy bureaucratic and administrative relations with other countries. The target is to facilitate the access to social rights all over Europe (health insurance, driver license and pension rights has just been created) and to create an European labour market with laws, social security systems and workforce training in common. As a matter of fact, while students live in an European dimension, only the 48% of workers could be available to move to another country to find a job. This fact asks EC to improve its strategies to create a flexible workforce and an European career guidance system.

4.3 Companies experiences

In this framework of economic crisis and high unemployment we can observe an implementation of competences validation practices in lots of companies. This actions have the aim to increase employment and to develop new competences for workers, to fight against risks of labour market coming-out.

The difficulties find out in companies experiences concerns the mismatch between worker’s needs and company benefit. As a matter of fact companies are not interested in giving workers instruments to find a new job in another company, that’s evident (ISFOL, 2012, p. 186).

Although we can find lots of resistances, there are some cases where companies needs and worker’s needs are integrated in a competences validation experience. These companies have a “social” vision of competences validation system, which main aspects can be synthesized and evidenced in:

- Centrality of social value of competences. In this companies in fact competences have high importance in human resources development processes and management.

- Centrality of recognition and validation of competences, as resources to affect the development of the company and of the working and learning processes of people.
- Centrality of experiences factors, as a good way to generate individual and collective learning processes.

For the fact that validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes helps workers to show and spend their competences, we can observe that companies are more stimulated to invest in this process towards a worker who has to find a new employment. In fact validation actions help workers to find another workplace and companies to break off work relations (with their obligations and costs). So, in conclusion, we could say that companies validation experiences help flexible work incoming and outgoing.

4.4 Non-profit experiences

European lifelong learning policies consider every experiences as learning events that encourage the origin, the development and the consolidation of learning outcomes and competences. Lifelong learning starts from the reflection about non-formal and informal learning outcomes. The non-profit sector is very rich of this types of learning outcomes, from the values which inspire non-profit action up to the deploy ban on profits: this organizations in fact develop sensibility and attention to social consequences of human actions and have the primary target to reach collective benefits.

To reach their mission, non-profit organizations needs competences, as it is shown by the number of new dedicated Masters. At the same time moreover, these organizations develop in people lots of key competences with the everyday work and with the capability to spend them in a dynamic social context. The Italian non-profit has improved its volunteers from 2001 to 2011, from 3,3mln up to 4,7mln, sign of the importance for the country. (ISTAT 2013).

This development follow the guidelines of “Europa 2020” Strategy, which aims to improve key competences as a way to live citizenship with consciousness, to improve employability and to access to lifelong learning programmes. Non-profit is the best place to develop these competences for its values and for its *milieu*.

In this framework there are some interesting experiences, which tried to match non-profit needs with employability and professionalization. The most important took inspiration by the method “RAP VPL – Raising Awareness of Potential benefit provided by VPL” based on Dutch model and was implemented in the City of Rome to validate competences developed during Civil Service. This project gathered four associations from different countries (Bulgaria, Germany, Holland and Italy) to share methods, experiences and different professionalism creating an European network. The project has involved 46 young people who worked for a year in the City of Rome in two

different projects and led them to obtain the validation of learning outcomes developed during these 12 months.

5. Conclusions

Surely Italy could do more and better for its RPL system. National system has weak strategies, with too few experimentations. Regional systems present differences from region to another one, with excellences and lows. There are some good practices in some companies and in some parts of non-profit sector, but not sufficient to talk about a widespread strategy. It is a long way to go for an equal recognition and validation learning outcomes system all over the country.

From a micro point of view I hope that Italian governments will invest more in non-profit sector. A country with 4,7mln of volunteers and more than 300.000 associations have necessarily to invest in these people, giving them tools to validate their experiences and to spend them in the labour market. As a matter of fact lots of competences remain hidden in the everyday work, but they have been developed by subjects during their voluntary service. Why could we valorise these resources? For example importing the Holland good practices, which is based on a continuous dialogue between public and private actors and on a strong investment on adult training, vocational training and validation of prior learning. The experience of “Steunpunt Scouting Gelderland” is considered an excellence all over Europe and it concerns thousands of young boy scouts. (ISFOL, 2012, pp. 78-82).

I think besides that public actors (state, regions and local institutions) have to improve their action and their role, not only with public investments but with the ability to network public offices, companies, association, universities. In the present economic scenario it's hard to imagine increasing investments of central state and that's the reason why I think we must look at the best collaborations practices between public and private actors to find a way out the present occupational crisis. The example of Emilia Romagna (explained in the 3rd chapter), with a territory governance based on strong collaboration between all these actors, could be winning: listening to companies and workers' needs, finding together solutions and experiencing projects in collaboration the government can find out less obstacles to promote employability.

The recognition and validation of learning outcomes could facilitate employability from a company to another one. The challenge of next years in fact will be the capability of national and international labour market to face the complexity age and globalization: in a faster world, with continuous mutations how can be solve the problem of loss of jobs and the emergence of new work sectors? Creating a widespread system of validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes could help surely workers finding new workplaces. Nevertheless institutions have to guarantee every

territory an efficient system. The role of state and regions towards this change of economic and labour paradigm will be the real challenge of Italy in next decade.

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