



**“European Observatory of Validation of non formal and informal learning”
(OBSERVAL)**

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Italian National Report 2009-2010

State of the art in the field of accreditation of informal and non-formal learning in Italy

This report accounts for the recognition and validation of knowledge, competences and skills, acquired by individuals through prior learning that has not been formally certified, in lifelong learning pathways in Italy. It describes the situation and developments in the period 2008-2010 in the different areas of lifelong and continuing learning, focusing on learning in non-formal and informal contexts, and drawing upon previous analyses and investigations published in other documents.¹ For a complete understanding of the present report, please refer also to the documentation available in the “Document section” in the OBSERVAL database and on the E-form website.

1. Introduction

There is by now a widespread understanding in Italy about the fundamental role of validation of non-formal and informal learning in any educational policy aiming at lifelong learning and adult education, and there is almost unanimous consensus about the need and urgency to build up an integrated, general system for LLL, compatible with EU frameworks in this field, allowing and stimulating mobility between “channels” and “levels” of education. Despite such potentially favourable conditions among experts and the pressures due to the commitment to apply EU policies at national level, no such system has yet been implemented, for a number of complex reasons:

- political (different degrees of awareness and interest for LLL topics in different socio-political areas; lack of stability of commitment to LLL),
- structural, related to specific features of the Italian educational system (separation between VET and HET; weakness of AE and LLL in general; insufficient development of the competence-based and learning outcomes based approach),

¹ Main sources taken into consideration:

Education and Training 2010. Italy, National Progress Report on the Implementation of the European Union Work Programme, ISFOL, May 2007

OECD Thematic Review on Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning, Country Background Italy, ISFOL, July 2008

European Inventory on Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning, Final Report, 2007 Update
Recognising Experiential Learning: Practices in European Universities, C. Corradi, N. Evans, A. Valk (eds.), EULLearN 2006

Transfine Project. Italy Case Study, 2003

UNIEDA, *Rapporto sull'Apprendimento permanente in Italia* 2009

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- institutional (competences attributed to a number of different stakeholders and actors, causing different speed in the implementation of policies; legal value of qualifications),
- economic (budget cuts imposed by governmental financial policy, worsening the situation of limited resources invested in the innovation of the educational system),
- cultural (low acceptance among academics of the relevance of LLL and of the value of competences gained through experiential learning),
- contingent (bad practice in the field of “validation” carried out mainly by private, and in some cases by public HE institutions).

Governmental strategies: research carried out at EU and international level, when describing the Italian legal conditions and on-going initiatives in the field of LLL, regularly points out with resignation that in Italy the lack of a national legal framework for LLL represents the main obstacle to the development and implementation of an efficient LLL policy in all educational areas. Existing legal references are therefore represented by a few governmental or ministerial decrees, some agreements between the national government and local authorities, and between governmental boards (national and regional level) and social partners, some regional laws or decrees (e.g. those deliberated in Lombardy, Piedmont, Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany).

The most significant attempt to overcome this lack of an over-arching regulation for LLL was made in August 2007 by the government in charge which submitted a “Draft bill concerning Regulations for Lifelong Learning” (*Schema di legge concernente: Norme in materia di Apprendimento permanente*), aiming at providing general rules for all areas of education, compatible with corresponding EU developments, in view of the implementation of an integrated system of lifelong learning. The document adopts the current definitions for formal, informal and non-formal learning, in use in European educational policy, and defines a number of principles and criteria for recognition and certification of learning occurred in non-formal and informal contexts.

A general device for recognition is proposed which, starting from the “identification” of competences, leads to the “validation of acquired knowledge” conceived as official statement, based upon criteria of equity, transparency and quality, which “allows the certification of the set of knowledge, skills and competences owned by the individual learner”. The government assumes the task of providing “general regulations concerning the identification and validation of learning occurring in formal, informal and non formal contexts, in view of access to the system of school and higher education”.

As a consequence of political changes in the general elections of Autumn 2008, causing the change of government, the innovative contents of the draft bill submitted by the previous Prodi government did not receive any further attention. Nevertheless the proposal was presented again as a draft bill submitted to the Senate of the Republic on November 4th, 2008, by the senator Finocchiaro pleading for the adoption of a “National Plan for Lifelong Learning” and inviting the government, among other objectives, to define “a system of identification and validation of learning of an informal and non formal kind”.

In the presence of total parliamentary inertness and governmental inactivity in this field, the aims expressed by the Finocchiaro proposal were later taken over, updated and extended in the draft bill “based upon people’s initiative” (*Proposta di legge di iniziativa popolare*) entitled “Right of Lifelong Learning”, submitted by the trade union CGIL to the Chamber of Deputies in January 2010, after collecting 130 000 support signatures among citizens. In the long list of objectives in the fields of lifelong learning and adult education, the document includes certification of competences and recognition of non formal and informal learning inviting the government to establish by means of a legislative decree, within 18 months after

approval of the law, the modes of “identification and validation” of such learning, in view of access to the system of institutionalized education and training. The certification of competences acquired through non formal and informal learning and their registration in the citizen’s personal “Educational passport” (*Libretto formativo*) is conceived as a right of citizens, to be guaranteed by the State according to EU regulations, and to be practically implemented with reference to the job descriptions and classifications included in the “Repertory of professional standards” (see below).

We must however consider that as of today the proposal has not even been discussed yet in Parliament and that the Parliament decision concerning the legitimacy of the plebiscite to be carried out for the approval is altogether uncertain. Approval of the law can therefore realistically not be expected to occur before 2012.

During the past three years no substantial changes in the legal reference framework for LLL – and consequently in official regulations for the validation of NF and IF learning – have occurred with respect to previous investigations. On the other hand, a few regulations approved in the meantime at regional level can be briefly mentioned here.

Regulations at regional level

Tuscany: as early as in 2002 a Regional Law (n° 32, 26/7/2002, with Operational Regulations n° 47/R, 8/8/2003) is approved which, launching the construction of an integrated system of education, includes lifelong learning in the system and establishes in extremely precise terms (Art. 66 of the Regulations) all features of the regional system of competences. Among the procedures for formal recognition and certification of competences, the objective of “making transparent all competences owned by the learner” by means of the “reconstruction of competences, with the support of qualified operators, no matter how they were acquired” is clearly explained, and “validation of competences” is envisaged, using a “personal validation file” that grants the learner the possibility of “documenting also the competences acquired in non formal and informal contexts”. In case of participation in a formal educational pathway, learning “can be reduced to attending only the modules related to competences that have not been validated”.

Lombardy: approving the regional government decision of 13/2/2008, regarding the system of vocational education and training, the Lombardy Region, providing detailed “regional plans for the offer of educational tools”, conceived in the general perspective of lifelong learning, develops also precise indications as far as the recognition and certification of learning occurred in non formal and informal contexts is concerned, as well as guidelines for the description and certification of competences and for the recognition of credits related to learning occurred in both formal and non formal or informal contexts. Referring to the regional framework of professional standards, the learner may obtain a “personal portfolio of competences”, including competences acquired through non formal and informal learning, as a basis for eventual exemption from corresponding learning activities (up to a maximum of 50 % of a study programme) in case of enrolment in a formal vocational education programme.

Emilia-Romagna: since January 2008 an Agreement between the Regional Government, local administrations and Social partners institutes a mixed Commission for Lifelong Learning (*“Tavolo Regionale per la formazione continua”*) with the task of promoting qualified interventions in the field of lifelong learning of workers and citizens, and in particular of implementing a unified system of certification of acquired competences. The Commission also pursues the specific objective of facilitating the “construction

of learning pathways which valorize and integrate learning occurred in the workplace” and allow “recognition of competences acquired in different contexts”.

In the following we shall concentrate on summing up the main features of the present situation, focusing in particular on the regulations concerning validation of prior learning occurred in informal and non-formal contexts.

2. The validation of prior non-formal and informal learning in specific areas of education

2.1. Continuing vocational education

In the field of vocational education (“*formazione professionale*”) falling under the responsibility of Regional and local authorities, a long lasting negotiation between the State and social partners led to the so-called “triangular agreement” of 1993, followed by laws n° 388 of 2000 and n° 289 of 2002, which instituted a multilateral common funding scheme for continuing vocational education (“*Fondi paritetici interprofessionali per la formazione continua*”) starting from 2004.

The system of continuing vocational education created through this funding scheme covers by now more than half of the entire education in this field in Italy, with more than 500 000 companies with their over 6 million workers, participating in the 16 existing sectoral funds that show a high rate of penetration both territorial and sectoral (somewhat weaker in the South), but encounter considerable difficulties in involving SMEs.

Educational targets are mainly aimed at satisfying training needs emerging at company level (technical and technological update, innovation-oriented training) rather than at producing individual career development (even though the latter is made possible due to an amendment introduced by Art. 48 of the law of 2002, allowing the funding of individual training programmes. Training courses mainly involve workers belonging to better qualified staff holding higher professional qualifications.

Until today the educational activities implemented in the framework of the “inter-professional funding scheme” do not contemplate any identification or check of entrance competences owned by the learner, neither a recognition of prior competences acquired in informal or non-formal contexts. As a matter of fact, a certain opening in that direction may be seen in the formulation of Art. 8 of the National Trilateral Agreement signed on 17/4/2006 by public institutions, social partners and “Interprofessional Funds” which establishes the common will to “implement educational activities ... in the perspective of constructing a decentralized system of certification of competences, agreed upon at national level”, since such a system is supposed to include those competences, too, which have been gained through learning of a non-formal and informal kind (see below the paragraph about the so-called “*Tavolo Unico*”).

During the process of implementation of the national trilateral agreement some regional administrations and provinces (Campania, Marche, Toscana, Emilia Romagna, Veneto, Liguria, Lazio, Trento) approved local agreements, but only one of them, the agreement of 24/1/2008 between the Regional Government of Emilia-Romagna and the social partners, while referring to the creation of a national system of certification of competences aiming at favouring mobility of individuals and the “recognition of competences however acquired”, establishes among the range of desirable quality requirements the effort to “laying the basis for the construction of educational pathways valorizing and integrating work based learning, ensuring

correspondence between educational offer and the demand for professional competences expressed by companies and workers, promoting the validation of competences acquired in different contexts”.

On the other hand, assuming that the educational programmes implemented by “interprofessional funds” are supposed to be specifically apt to satisfy the workers’ educational needs, we must admit that no explicit need or request for the recognition of prior knowledge and competence originating from informal and non-formal learning seems to emerge among workers, taking also into account the low average level of formal qualification (first grade secondary school diploma – “3^a Media”) that often incentivizes the acquisition of a higher formal qualification. Exactly for this reason there is increasing awareness among major trade unions that efficient vocational training through “interprofessional funds” can be launched only promoting in general the value of continuing education among workers; including in the collective agreements to be signed between the unions and employers’ organizations the perspective of educational pathways for the workers’ individual career development, accompanied by the validation of competences accumulated through prior learning supported by a public system of recognition of competences based upon work experiences (work based learning).

Tavolo Unico : in order to understand the complex and contradictory situation in the field of continuing vocational education in Italy, it is useful to refer to the developments concerning the “definition of a national system of minimum professional standards, certification of competences and educational standards”. First came an initial Agreement on these topics between territorial authorities (Regions and Provinces) and social partners in 2003; then it was followed by the creation in April 2006 of a national Commission (“*Tavolo Unico*”), including representatives of the Ministries of Labour and Education, the regional governments and the social partners, in charge of contributing to the preparation of the Italian Qualifications Framework, compatible with the EQF; altogether these developments were soon accompanied with an alternation of progresses and stops: indeed, the pressure coming from some organisations, coherently engaged in this field (trade unions and some regional governments) and positively supported by the political forces that are open to educational innovation are periodically nullified by changes in political equilibrium and by educational inertia owned by conservative political forces.

The repertory of professional standards and standards of recognition and certification of competences, in construction since 2006, was meant to provide principles, criteria and procedures for the valorization of competences and envisaged to evaluate and validate competences owned by individuals taking into consideration not only formal, but also informal and non-formal contexts of learning. Once in place, the recognition tools linked with professional standards are supposed to grant learners in the area of continuing vocational training a coherent validation of their competences and skills.

After an interruption of activities lasting almost three years, due to political reasons, the Commission has recently (23/9/2010) met again, and the trade unions, in a common paper submitted to the Commission, suggest to urgently identify “transparent procedures allowing every citizen to recognize and get certification for his/her professional competences”, referring also to EQF and insisting on the “possibility for the worker to get recognition and certification also for the competences tacitly owned and tacitly employed in the workplace”.

The negative consequences of the lack of implementation of this national repertory of professional standards and criteria for the certification of competences clearly emerged in one of the most important educational channels for continuing vocational training, the system of “Higher Technical and Education and Training” (*IFTS – Istruzione e Formazione Tecnica Superiore*).

As soon as April 2000 the IFTS Regulations stated in general terms the intention to recognize prior learning in the phase of admission to IFTS courses, envisaging the “accreditation of competences previously acquired through work and life experiences and the recognition of eventual educational credits when establishing the duration of the individual learning pathway”. However, an enormous delay occurred in the development of applicative regulations and guidelines, capable of defining admission requirements and learning outcomes in terms of competences and of indicating operational details about the implementation of the admission procedure. This procedure was in fact supposed to include the definition of educational needs of the individual learner basing on guided self-analysis and systematic evaluation of the competences owned by him/her (including those acquired through experience) and on certification of these competences in terms of credits, and as such necessarily referred to the (missing) repertory of professional standards of competences in the sector in which each course was located. It was only in April 2010 that a national agreement concerning vocational education and training has now been deliberated providing also a framework of competences for many professions covered by IFTS courses, without however defining procedures for the validation of competences acquired through prior learning of an informal or non-formal kind.

Waiting for the national legal framework to be completely defined, a number of (more or less isolated) pilot experiences aiming at experimenting educational innovation, were implemented at local level by organisations which are aware of the importance of the topic of validation of prior learning in the field of vocational education, too.

2.2. Adult education

Life long learning as an individual right, as a tool for active citizenship and for cultural growth in a complex, multiethnic, globalized society was not originally supported in Italy by national regulations defining the educational offer for adults in the framework of public instruction, but instead was developed and administered through the initiative and under the responsibility of local administrations.

Starting from the Ministerial Decree nr. 455 of 1997, permanent territorial centres for adult education (*CTP - Centri Territoriali Permanenti per l'educazione degli adulti*) had a strong development and covered an important social function, even though they chronically suffered the precarious financial situation of this sector. Following the educational reform which decentralised competences in the field of education and training, and especially the Agreement between the State and territorial and local bodies (Regions, Provinces, Municipalities, etc. – “*Conferenza Unificata*”) concerning the re-organisation and reinforcement of continuing education for adults, approved on March 2nd, 2003, most regional governments included adult education among the areas of development of a specific educational offer.

In October 2004 a subsequent Agreement produced by the same body, establishing regulations for the final and intermediate certification and for the recognition of competences in case of transition from one educational subsystem to another, envisages the possibility for learners aged 18 and over to be admitted to vocational education pathways on the basis of learning and competences acquired both in formal and in informal and non-formal contexts. Credits related to such learning are attributed through transparent procedures put in place by the territorial authorities, using a specific certification form provided as attachment to the Agreement (“*Attestazione di riconoscimento di crediti in ingresso al processo di*

formazione professionale") in which apprenticeship, work and self-training are contemplated as "acquisition contexts", alongside with formal educational institutions.

Even though there still is no national regulatory framework for adult education, the Ministerial Decree of October 25th 2007 launched a re-organisation process for the entire sector, to come completely into force during the forthcoming school year 2010/11, transforming significantly the former CTP in CPIA (*Provincial Centres for Adult Instruction*). The terminological change, replacing the generic term 'education' with the narrower term 'instruction' (formal education) seems to underline an increasing weight put upon catching up with formal school qualifications at different levels, implying an increasing rigidity of educational offer and a reduction of the social role of adult education in general.

Following EU developments, a redefinition of organisational and didactic conditions, approved by the government in June 2009, envisages the definition of learning outcomes "in terms of knowledge, skills and competences" introducing a new tool, the so-called "*patto formativo individuale*" (individual learning agreement), to be used for the personalisation of learning pathways based upon the "recognition of formal, informal and non-formal knowledge and competences owned by the adult". During the phase of admission to vocational courses, qualifications and certifications concerning competences (see above) are due to be verified by the competent educational organisation, not excluding the eventual use of "additional examinations in order to assess the learner's level of knowledge, skills and competences, being understood the need of valorising the individual's cultural and professional heritage on the basis of a reconstruction of his/her personal history."

If on one hand the "importance and obligation of certifying competences acquired in multiple contexts" is expressed and the principle of "valorisation of competences acquired anyhow by the individual in formal, informal and non-formal contexts" is stated, on the other hand the definition of procedures to be implemented for the validation of informal and non-formal learning is once again postponed to subsequent measures to be established in future Guidelines.

The most recent inter-ministerial Decree (Education and Finance) n° 194 issued in March 2010 is mainly interested however in introducing budget cuts for the system of adult education, rather than providing the missing Guidelines for validation.

The negative effects of the missing national system of lifelong learning emerges clearly in this sub-sector, too, confirming how essential and urgent it is to achieve the definition of such a general framework satisfying the educational needs of adults.

2.3. Higher Education

The situation of lifelong learning in the Italian Higher Education system is characterised by a strong fragmentation and an insufficient overall development, to be attributed no doubt to a delay in defining the social role of the University in a lifelong learning perspective, but mainly due to the lack of a national legal framework and the absence of a corresponding general educational policy carried out by the competent Ministry.

In this context the topic of recognition at university level of knowledge and competences acquired by individuals through prior learning in informal and non-formal contexts, i.e. in learning activities occurred outside the university, is still very marginal in the debate about the reform of higher education, even though it is a requirement emerging with increasing urgency in the European Higher Education Area.

The possibility of recognising credits based on learning activities carried out outside the higher education system appeared for the first time in the Reform Act launched with the Ministerial Decree n° 509 towards the end of 1999. According to Art. 5, par. 7 of the Decree Universities are authorised to recognise two kinds of learning: on one hand, “professional knowledge and skills”, in other words, the results of learning (of an informal kind) occurring in the workplace, as long as they are certified; on the other hand, “knowledge and skills acquired in post-secondary learning activities” (for example in IFTS courses, see above), as long as the university itself took part in the planning and implementation of those activities.

The impact of this innovation was extremely weak in the beginning. Starting from 2002 only, a private University in Rome (Libera Università di Maria SS. Assunta – LUMSA) launched two bachelor degree programmes (in the fields of social service and teacher training) characterised by the recognition of credits for prior learning related to competences acquired by the learner through professional activities. But the LUMSA scheme called “*Laureare l’esperienza*” (“Get a degree through experience”), originally aiming at reproducing in Italy a model of higher education pathways already experimented in other European member States, was rapidly adopted by other, mainly private higher education institutions, leading to the scandalous bad practice of essentially unverified exemptions and shortening of learning pathways for members of professional associations, public administrations and State bodies (see Case Study submitted for Observal).

As a reaction to this degeneration, the Ministry was forced in March 2007 to make a restrictive intervention establishing that the maximum volume of credits to be recognised, with reference to learning occurred in non-university contexts, cannot be higher than one third of the overall amount of credits of a study programme; while, at the same time, the Ministerial Decree n° 270 of 2004, introducing modifications of a few aspects of the Higher Education Reform of 1999, was simply and literally confirming the arrangements concerning the recognition of credits established by Art. 5,7 of M.D. 509. In addition, any professional competences submitted for recognition have to be certified individually.

Even though both modifications have a clearly defensive character, aiming at facing an emergency, the limitation of the amount of credits that can be recognised represents a heavy drawback for the diffusion of the lifelong learning perspective at higher education level. The decision to permit recognition of no more than 60 credits for a bachelor and no more than 40 credits for a master represents therefore a serious obstacle to the implementation of an advanced system of higher education that fully corresponds to the citizens’ right for lifelong learning.

A totally different approach was adopted, exactly in the same period of time (March 2007), by the Ministry of Higher Education when it submitted a policy document entitled “Guiding Principles for Lifelong Learning in Higher Education” (“*Linee di indirizzo – Università e Apprendimento permanente*”). Recalling the University’s task in the field of LLL and analysing data, reasons and effects of the institutional delay occurring in this sector, the document proposes the construction of a “Centre for Lifelong Learning” (*Centro per l’Apprendimento Permanente – CAP*) in each University. Among the complex tasks envisaged for CAPs, explicit reference is made to the validation of experiences and competences acquired in non-university learning contexts aiming, on one hand, at the “development of more personalised higher education pathways” and especially, on the other hand, at the “abbreviation of study pathways for the learners who have accumulated significant professional experience in a subject field having affinity with the specific higher education pathway”; and, last but not least, facilitating the development of more flexible study programmes “in cooperation with public bodies or private organizations ... favouring integration between professional activity and higher education.”

A national working group was appointed by the Minister, charged of elaborating national Guidelines for University Regulations concerning the validation of prior learning, and establishing principles and quality-oriented procedures for the “recognition and certification of learning however occurred” and thus enabling the Universities to be “connected with the future national certification system ... in the perspective of integration between the single educational systems”.

Following the government change in Autumn 2008, the working group activities, having produced several subsequent draft versions of the Guidelines, were stopped. Not only: the actual government, confirming its deep-going incomprehension on the topic of LLL, in the definitive text of the reform bill about re-organisation of the higher education system (DDL 28/10/2009, Art. 6) proposes to reduce the possibility of validation of informal and non formal learning from the former (already reduced! see above) maximum of 60 to 12 credits only. The meaning of such a position is unequivocal: Reducing the weight of validation-based credit award to just 7 % of the overall credit volume of a bachelor study programme, implies that the educational value of work experience and of other kinds of learning is a priori denied. On the other hand, the Ministry of Education significantly reserves the right to grant exceptions to the general rule to provide for “particular needs” expressed by educational institutions of Public Administration.

We may conclude by pointing out that any institutional progress in the field of validation of informal and non-formal learning at higher education level is suspended due to the enormous and persisting difficulties for the actual government to get the Higher education reform bill approved by the Parliament, mainly because of generalised opposition against the government proposal from by far the majority of both academic and administrative or technical employees in the higher education institutions all over the country.

In presence of an extremely uncertain regulatory and institutional framework and, on the other hand, of an undoubted pressure coming from European policies and deadlines, a certain number of innovative initiatives and educational experiments or pilot projects have nevertheless taken place or have been launched in the field of validation of informal and non-formal learning in higher education, too.

3. Conclusions : the overall state of play

The dominant features characterising the overall situation of validation of non formal and informal learning in the lifelong learning perspective in Italy are no doubt to be identified in the concepts of **contradiction**, **discontinuity** and **potentiality**, as appears clearly from the legal, organisational, institutional conditions we have tried to describe in this report.

Contradiction concerns: the simultaneous presence of correct conceptual tools and of insufficient operational capacity; the contrast between territorial, regional and sectoral dynamism and national inertia; the rupture between pilot experiences developed in higher education and the unscrupulous attempts to exploit existing legal opportunities for getting private economic benefits; the irreconcilable opposition between innovation-oriented availability and conservative lack of interest; the distance between up-dated competence among experts and widespread popular lack of awareness.

Discontinuity can be observed in the chronical “stop-and-go” process determined by changes in political power; in the considerable differences between advanced and backward Regions and local administrations;

in the lack of common support, beyond political and ideological divergences, for lifelong learning policies, making every acquisition precarious and subject to revocation.

Potentiality, in terms of both human resources and institutional structures, at the level of ready organisational tools and of models of elaborate legal frameworks, in terms of transnational relations both in practical pilot experiences and in social research, is the main factor of confidence for a positive evolution in the future.

Despite the lack of appropriate legal frameworks at national level, non formal and informal learning is nevertheless being validated in daily practice especially in the field of **continuing vocational education and training** through the combined effect of social and political awareness among the social partners and existing well-designed regional legal frameworks.

Only a few experiences of validation of informal and non formal learning are running at experimental level in the area of **adult education**.

The **Higher education** system is presently involved in a violent struggle engaging all categories against the government's attempt to impose a counter-reform in many aspects of university life, accompanied by considerable cuts in public funding for the system, thus threatening even the institutional survival of State Universities. This complex situation, together with traditional academic reticence towards informal and non formal learning, temporarily implies a very low priority for innovation topics such as the validation of competences acquired outside the system in view of admission to higher education pathways. But more extensive pilot experiences are likely to be launched as soon as the situation of general unrest and lack of serenity will have come to an end.

Florence, October 7th, 2010