

# European Inventory

on validation of informal and  
non-formal learning



# European inventory on validation of informal and non-formal learning Italy

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## 1.0 Introduction

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The establishment of a validation system for informal and non-formal learning has become a strong and widely-shared priority in Italy in recent years. All social and political stakeholders are in agreement that there is a need for a formal system for the validation of informal and non-formal learning. However, Italy does not yet have a comprehensive national system, comparable for example to VAE in France, or APL in the UK. This is due to various social, political and historical-cultural factors, such as the high value given to formal qualifications. The main barrier is felt to be the lack of national standards regarding qualifications and competences.

Currently, a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is under development, which is intended to be over-arching and to enable validation of informal and non-formal learning at all different levels. A common standard system of competences has been set out, which aims to improve geographic as well as the professional mobility between Italian and European regions. The objective of this system is to obtain transparency in the training and education system, to better assess the individual's experiences and to acquire a better match between supply and demand on the labour market.

At the same time, tests of different validation methodologies are being carried out through regional initiatives. The "*Libretto Formativo del Cittadino*" (Citizen's Training Portfolio), an official document which records the skills acquired through training programmes organised by certified agencies and those acquired in non-formal and informal contexts, was approved and adopted by National Decree in 2005. This has been promoted on a regional level and it is currently being tested in eleven Regions over the period 2006-2007.

Thus, although there is not yet a comprehensive national system for validation, there is a lot of learning through experience from regional initiatives. However, the results of these initiatives are difficult to compare, due to the lack of a national framework of references. Each initiative is devised and implemented in response to a different context and demands, for example projects range from validation carried out from an internal private company perspective, within the education sector, or as support tool for the unemployed. Good practice from these initiatives will help to inform the implementation of validation on a wider scale in the coming years.

## 2.0 Public Sector

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### 2.1 Key Public Sector Stakeholders

The bodies responsible for validation in Italy are the Ministry of Education and the Regions. Schools and universities carry out validation of credits to access the education system on behalf of the Ministry of Education. VET Agencies and/or job centres in the regions carry out the validation of credit for a vocational qualification and also for the 'Citizen's Training Portfolio', the *Libretto Formativo*.

At a national level, the Government itself is responsible for designing guidelines concerning the VET and welfare policies. The Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Education ordinarily convert general guidelines into national Laws and Decrees and design the overall structure, taking into account aspects such as training pathways, qualification levels, duration and access.

Regions and autonomous Provinces have increasingly acquired an important role in the implementation and management of the VET system over the last ten years. At present the Regions are responsible for both the VET and the school system, within a general national framework designed through the recent Law n. 53/2003.

In almost all sectors, a negotiated process of reform has been carried out, involving all the relevant actors such as the Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Education and University, the Regions and the Social Partners.

### 2.2 Legal Framework

Labour market and employment service reforms aim to make validation practices more widespread by adopting analytical tools (balance of skills, curricula, etc.) and transparency instruments (personal training booklet, workers' register) to enhance acquired skills and ensure more efficient management of individualised vocational pathways.<sup>1</sup>

In a complex governance framework, the issue of validation of non-formal learning has been institutionally dealt with in several ways through:

<sup>1</sup> ISFOL. Country Report, Italy: Achieving the Lisbon Goal: the Contribution of Vocational Education and Training Systems.

## 2.2.1 Formal agreements between Government and social partners

In **1996**, the Government and Social Partners adopted an **Employment Agreement** (which confirmed and upgraded the relevant results of previous negotiations; in particular the July 1993 Agreement), which contains several strategic guidelines for reform of the VET system. The Agreement identifies among its core points the establishment of “*a certification system as a suitable instrument to assure a unitary and visible pathway of lifelong learning to every single individual, to allow the recognition of training credits, and to register the effectively acquired competences*”.

## 2.2.2 National laws of decrees

The most important recent national laws in the context of validation of informal and non-formal learning are the above-mentioned **Law 53/2003**, reforming the VET system (school, vocational training and apprenticeship) and the **Law 30/2003** reforming labour market rules (contracts and job placement services).

The former (Law 53/2003) confirms the importance of alternating school, training and work in the lifelong learning perspective and envisages the creation of institutional devices and practices which would valorise individual learning experiences, irrespective of the context in which they have been developed.

The latter, Law 30/2003 and the successive Decree n. 276/2003, provide for the establishment of the “*Libretto Formativo del Cittadino*” (Citizen's Training Portfolio), an official document which records the skills acquired through training programmes organised by certified agencies and those acquired in non-formal and informal contexts. However, it is mentioned that the *Libretto* is not yet a real credit recognition device, but has been established to promote and facilitate credit transfer of competences [i.e. the document merely documents the type of training that the individual has undertaken, but does not assign it any value]<sup>1</sup>. The Regions have promoted the instrument, and it is currently being tested in eleven Regions over the period 2006-2007.

**Decree 276/2003** states that the purpose of the *Libretto Formativo* is to record the experience acquired during apprenticeships, integration contracts, continuing training and work, as well as formal and non-formal skills acquired, in line with EU guidelines.

The *Libretto Formativo* was approved and adopted by the **National Decree of 10 October 2005**.

<sup>1</sup> OECD Project on the Recognition of Non-formal and informal learning, Italy Country background Report, December 2006

### 2.2.3 Ministerial decrees

In May **2001** a Ministry of Labour Decree was introduced, entitled “*Certification of competences in the vocational training system*”. The Decree's new competence certification system aimed to render training programmes more transparent, validate individual experiences, and to assist in matching job demand and supply in the labour market. Competences are defined in the decree as “...*structured clusters of knowledge and abilities normally connected to specific job profiles, which can be acquired through vocational training programmes, work experiences and self-learning, which are valuable also as training 'credits'*”. The Decree envisages that a system of national standards for competence certification will be established, as well as three kinds of Certification devices: the Vocational Training Qualification Certification, the Vocational Training Competence Certification and the Accreditation of Competences Procedure. Also, according to this Decree the “Citizen’s Training Portfolio” (*Libretto Formativo del Cittadino*) should be established by each Region in order to document and register the different certification acquired by individuals.

### 2.2.4 Regional legal provisions

In March **2000**, the Government and the Regional Authorities signed an agreement which gave a general definition of the procedures for establishing a national system of vocational competence certification. The agreement ruled that the Ministry of Labour would formulate proposals with respect to the criteria and procedures for certifying the competences acquired by vocational training, in order to ensure the standardisation of certificates throughout the country, and their recognition within the EU.<sup>1</sup>

In January **2004**, an agreement was signed by the Minister of Education and University, the Minister of Labour and Social Policies, the Regional Authorities, and the Autonomous Provincial Authorities of Trento and Bolzano. A key aspect of the Agreement is the definition of a pathway for the governance of the national and local system, involving a chain of ‘cascade’ functions.

On a national level the following responsibilities are envisaged:

- The definition of the general system for the classification of vocational skills;
- The definition of standard general criteria for certifying skills (training booklet);
- The definition of standard general criteria for ascertaining credits (training/training, training/education, education/training);
- The definition of the minimum skill training standards;

<sup>1</sup>Di Francesco, G., 2006, New OECD Activity on: Recognition of Non Formal and Informal Learning, Brief Introduction to the Italian Certification System and to the Recognition of Competencies, Paris, 2006

- The identification of the minimum accreditation standards for the facilities providing vocational education and training courses.

On a regional level the following responsibilities are envisaged:

- The governance of the skill and credit system as well as the related support services;
- The adaptation of skills to the local context;
- The methods and procedures for assessment, evaluation and certification of skills and credits before, during and after the pathways;
- The design standards;
- The detailed definition of the indispensable requisites required from facilities providing vocational education and training pathways.<sup>1</sup>

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In April **2004**, an important agreement was achieved by the ‘Joint Conference State-Regions-Local Bodies’ (29 April 2004) concerning the minimum standard of acquired competences/of performance, based on the French “*unités capitalisables*” methodology and affecting 37 professional profiles in Agriculture, Environment, Building, ICT, Manufacturing industry, Transport and Tourism.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.2.5 Other agreements

On 25 October **2006**, the permanent conference for the relationships between the State, Regions and Autonomous provinces has ratified an agreement to recognise Minimum Training requirements for technical professional competences for 14 professional roles, on the basis of a common certification recognised by regions and autonomous provinces, as an outcome of experimental pathways. The recognised professional roles are the first step towards a definition of a repertory of technical professional competencies, with a view to establishing a national framework of professional standards. The agreement foresees the adoption of guidelines for final and intermediary certification, as well as methodological criteria for updating minimum national training/education standards.<sup>3</sup>

The Ministry of Education, the president of the Committee of the Regions and the social partners signed an agreement on continuing vocational training (*formazione continua*) in **2007**. The agreement calls for a unified logic of planning together with interventions of continuing vocational training, through the different financial instruments that are available. It also calls for the establishment of a system of certification of competences that could be

<sup>1</sup> Refernet (2006) 08 - Accumulating, Transferring And Validating Learning. CEDEFOP.

<sup>2</sup> VPL, WP3: National Review, Italy. Available at: [http://www.vpl4.eu/national/download\\_view.php?id=78](http://www.vpl4.eu/national/download_view.php?id=78)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.flcgil.it/notizie/news/2006/ottobre/percorsi\\_sperimental\\_i\\_integrati\\_definiti\\_e\\_riconosciuti\\_a\\_livello\\_nazionale\\_gli\\_standard\\_formativi\\_minimi\\_di\\_14\\_figure\\_professionali](http://www.flcgil.it/notizie/news/2006/ottobre/percorsi_sperimental_i_integrati_definiti_e_riconosciuti_a_livello_nazionale_gli_standard_formativi_minimi_di_14_figure_professionali)

used for all training activities, including those of the inter-professional training funds. The agreement asks for the parties to reassess accreditation procedures, to arrive at a system of efficient rules across the whole national territory, better fit for quality criteria and conditions for information that can be used by companies and individuals when they are choosing the most appropriate training.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.3 Higher Technical Education and Training (IFTS)

The Higher Technical Education and Training (IFTS) pathways were created by law (Law 144/99) *“to qualify and broaden the training supply for young people and adults, both employed and not employed”*. IFTS pathways are characterised as open options, which are ‘anchored’ to the changing needs of local markets rather than identified training needs. IFTS pathways last for a minimum of two and a maximum of four semesters and are promoted and managed at least by four different VET providers: a school, a University, a training agency and a company. The courses include practical training, ‘on the job’, for at least 30% of each curriculum. Once the IFTS training is successfully concluded, the University partner assures the recognition of a certain number of university credits valid for further enrolling in University academic courses.

IFTS pathways are the first national competence-based certification tool. The certified competences, according to the standard model chosen in IFTS, are considered the result of a training pathway.<sup>2</sup>

IFTS pathways can be accessed on the basis of an upper secondary education certificate. Those who do not hold the upper secondary education certificate can also access IFTS, on the basis of accreditation of competences acquired in previous education, training and work pathways, if they have completed compulsory schooling, taking into account, in particular, the qualification attained during the fulfilment of the compulsory training requirement specified in Art. 68 of Law 144/99. Any previous training credits can also be recognised to determine the length of the individual pathway.<sup>3</sup>

A concrete tool for validating previous learning has been designed in IFTS and has been launched through specific guidelines attached to the regulation documents on 1 August **2002** (Agreement between Government and Regions). The guidelines outline that: validation is meant to facilitate the access to IFTS pathways or a transfer from one system

<sup>1</sup> Formazione continua: firmato l'accordo

[http://www.flcgil.it/notizie/news/2007/aprile/formazione\\_continua\\_firmato\\_l\\_accordo](http://www.flcgil.it/notizie/news/2007/aprile/formazione_continua_firmato_l_accordo)

<sup>2</sup> Transfine Project, Italy Case Study

<sup>3</sup> The procedures for accreditation of competences are defined by means of the agreements stated in Art. 5, paragraph 3”.

to another; the building of a national competence standard system is envisaged by all the institutional and social actors as a necessary requirement to guarantee the reliability of the validation processes.

## 2.4 University Reform

The Italian University system is currently involved in a large-scale reform process, which started in 1999 (Decreto n.509 del 3/11/1999). The reform envisages validation of prior learning, including the validation of prior learning as ECTS credits. The reform also redefines the times and procedures for the access to qualifications. The reform is described as radical, its principles being the autonomy of the Universities, the need for flexible training pathways, and the application of a credit system.<sup>1</sup> However, practices for this have not been mainstreamed, nor are there shared guidelines on procedures and results of validation.

This does not mean that the issues of assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning are ignored but simply that they are not considered as an immediate priority matter. Nevertheless, some good experiences have been developed, in particular within the IFTS system. The IFTS experience can be considered as a crucial crossroad for increasing the awareness of the importance of validation issues within the university system development.

The Ministry of Education, Universities and Research has further restricted the criteria for the validation of informal and non formal knowledge to be used by universities. In a letter dated June, 1, 2006 to the Italian Rectors (Prot. 149/segr./DGU/2006), the General Direction for Universities in the Ministry reiterated the basic criteria for accreditation of experiential learning. These criteria now are the following:

1. No more than 60 credits out of 180 can be recognised as a result of validation of prior learning
2. Validation can apply only to certified learning (thus, informal and non formal learning are not included), or to learning acquired in university courses; the latter can be short modules, continuing education academic courses, or credits acquired during formal enrolment towards a university degree which, for personal reasons, the student did not complete.<sup>2</sup>

So far, efforts to circulate the principles of APEL (as in the UK) or *Validation des acquis* (as in France) have not been successful in the Italian Higher Education system.

<sup>1</sup> Refernet (2006) 08 - Accumulating, Transferring And Validating Learning. CEDEFOP.

<sup>2</sup> Information provided by Consuelo Corradi, Professor of Sociology, School of Education, Lumsa University (Rome).

## **2.5 Adult Education (EDA)**

The term 'Adult Education' refers to the body of formal (certified education and vocational training) and non-formal (culture, health education, training for associative life, physical and motor education) education opportunities that address adult citizens, are certifiable and the purpose of which is the provision of basic personal competences (for social visibility) in the fields of transferable basic competences (for the employability of the working citizen).

According to the agreement of 2 March 2000 of the Unified Conference, the objectives of this type of training are:

- To increase the availability of labour force endowed with an adequate basic qualification;
- To foster the assertion of the citizenship rights also in the educational field;
- To increase the number of places for expanding the access to basic-training opportunities throughout the lifetime;
- To create an integrated system for basic training, during the adult years, that involves all the systems as a whole.

EDA, implemented through the Permanent Territorial Centres for Adult Education, creates a new education opportunity. EDA involves the following systems:

- The school system;
- The regional training system;
- The employment-service system;
- The public infrastructure (libraries, museums, etc.);
- The enterprises;
- The non-profit associations;
- The university system.

## **2.6 Validation in practice**

### **2.6.1 Funding and Support<sup>1</sup>**

During the period 2000-2006, the Ministry of Labour financed (through ESF) a national action to promote principles, models and practices in the field of certification and

<sup>1</sup> Di Francesco, G., 2006, New OECD Activity on: Recognition of Non Formal and Informal Learning, Brief Introduction to the Italian Certification System and to the Recognition of Competencies, Paris, 2006

recognition of competences acquired in different learning contexts, and to monitor the 'bottom-up' innovative processes which emerged from the regional bodies.

The Ministry of Education, within the implementation of IFTS (Higher Technical Educational and Training System), EDA (Adult Education), and right-duty reforms, has also given in recent years an important impulse to the adoption of models and instruments to facilitate the recognition of credits and competences, both entering into the training path and accessing upper levels of qualification.

The costs for the existing practices of validation are thus usually incorporated within training projects which form part of the regional actions connected to ESF or other sources of financing.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.6.2 Procedures

As the third certification device envisaged by the May 2001 Ministry of Labour Decree has not yet been formalised, it is today only possible to describe some basic features and trends of the institutional accreditation of the prior learning model in Italy, based on the devices designed in the IFTS and Adult Education Systems.

In Italy these new devices are aimed to facilitate *re-access to VET pathways or a transfer from one system to another*. This means that wherever the accreditation is going to be applied it always has the effect of a "credit", meant to allow the access or a "bonus" (a reduction) towards an education or training path. The devices are thus not simply for the accreditation of work experiences, nor are they for the accreditation of a whole training qualification or education diploma as is the case in countries with more advanced validation legislation and procedures, such as France.<sup>2</sup>

The validation process both in IFTS and adult education is carried out in three steps:

- The first step involves **guidance/counselling**, which involves the active participation of the individual in self-analysis and in the identification of his/her specific training needs. It is carried out by a counsellor operator and produces a basic Individual Project.
- The second step is the **assessment** step, which aims to collect evidence in a systematic way and ensure the possession of specific competences. It is carried out by one (or more) assessors who help the individual to compose a Dossier that includes all the relevant evidence (certifications, declarations, documented information about training, work or other experiences). All this experience is translated into competences

<sup>1</sup> Refernet (2006) 08 - Accumulating, Transferring And Validating Learning. CEDEFOP.

<sup>2</sup> Transfine Project, Italy Case Study

in the dossier. The dossier is used to produce a further document, the Individual Portfolio that will accompany the individual also after leaving training.

- The final **certification/recognition** step involves a certification, or access, or a bonus towards a training pathway. This is managed by a Commission in which all the education and training institutions involved are represented. Credits are recognised on the basis of the Dossier.<sup>1</sup>

The most widespread methods for the assessment step of the validation process rely on three systems:

- Individual interviews of a more or less structured nature, in which the self-declaratory components prevail
- Self-assessment of elements relating to personal characteristics using purpose-built tools
- Self-assessment using group sessions

There is little recourse to objective tests or to analysis of documents or testimonials by a third party.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.6.3 Activities

Even though the establishment of a validation system for non-formal and informal learning has become a strong and widely shared priority in the last ten years, there are few effectively implemented institutional practices in Italy at national level.

The regional Authorities launched integrated local or sectoral actions under the ESF programmes for the period 2000-2006. Although these initiatives were disconnected, the Regional Coordination Project played an important role in establishing common qualification and competence standards and learning certificate procedures.<sup>3</sup>

Following the January 2004 Agreement mentioned above, an Interregional Project entitled *“Description and Certification by Vocational Skills and Families – Minimum Standards with a View to Integration between Education, Vocational Training and Work”* aimed at proposing *“an initial reference model for a national skill standard system with a view to integration between education, vocational training and work”* was successfully launched.

<sup>1</sup> Refernet (2006) 08 - Accumulating, Transferring And Validating Learning. CEDEFOP.

<sup>2</sup> OECD Project on Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning, Italy Country Background Report, Draft December 2006

<sup>3</sup> Di Francesco, G., 2006, New OECD Activity on: Recognition of Non Formal and Informal Learning, Brief Introduction to the Italian Certification System and to the Recognition of Competencies, Paris, 2006

The Regional Authorities are making a considerable contribution to the gradual definition of the national standard and certification system.<sup>1</sup>

The Emilia Romagna, Piemonte and Val d'Aosta Regions have attempted a self-regulation of their own VET system and promoted some initiatives of validation of non-formal and informal learning addressed to specific target groups.

In certain regions, some significant experiences on certification have been carried out in the field of 'apprenticeship'. In regions such as Abruzzo, Basilicata, Emilia Romagna, Umbria, the Autonomous Provinces of Bolzano and of Trento, the certification for apprentices is issued directly by the regional and/or provincial structure and written on the personal 'portfolio'. In other regions such as Liguria, Veneto, Campania, Sicilia, Valle d'Aosta, the certification is given by external communities with procedures defined by the Regions themselves in agreement with the social partners.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in some Regions of Italy, the accreditation of prior experiential competences is a reality, although it is actually practised only for specific populations in response to specific demands. Moreover, in many contexts (Regions, Universities, professional regulation) a number of interesting projects have been carried out.

#### 2.6.4 Emilia Romagna- a regional system for the formalisation and certification of competences<sup>3</sup>

On April 19, 2006, the Emilia Romagna regional government approved a regional system for the formalisation and certification of competences. It follows the Decision n. 1434 of 12/09/2005, named "*Approaches, methodology and structure for the definition of the regional system for the formalisation and certification of competencies*". This Act represents the first institutional achievement in Italy, which sets the trail for other Italian regions.

The formalisation and certification process addresses two general categories of users:

- Individuals who have attended (but not necessarily completed) a training path which is to be followed by the issuing of a formal document or a certificate;
- Individuals with experience acquired in non formal settings (on the job) and/or in informal environments and/or holding a declaration issued within a formal training path.

The outputs of the formalisation and certification process are:

<sup>1</sup> Refernet (2006) 08 - Accumulating, Transferring And Validating Learning. CEDEFOP.

<sup>2</sup> VPL, WP3: National Review, Italy. Available at: [http://www.vpl4.eu/national/download\\_view.php?id=78](http://www.vpl4.eu/national/download_view.php?id=78)

<sup>3</sup> VPL, WP3: National Review, Italy. Available at: [http://www.vpl4.eu/national/download\\_view.php?id=78](http://www.vpl4.eu/national/download_view.php?id=78)

- the “Ability and knowledge outline”, a document in which the individual’s abilities and knowledge (competencies) are formalised;
- the “Competencies certificate”, a document in which abilities and knowledge (corresponding to a given training standard) are certified, after passing a specific test/exam;
- the “Certificate of vocational qualification”, a document in which abilities and knowledge (corresponding to a given professional qualification) are certified, after passing a specific test/exam.

The process can be followed in a personalised way throughout an individual’s lifetime. It follows these four phases:

- presentation of the request for formalisation and certification;
- verification by means of evidences;
- verification by means of tests/examinations;
- administrative procedures for issuing the relevant documents and certification.

These phases are supplemented throughout by individual guidance and advice, provided by trained staff.

## 2.6.5 Context-specific examples of validation initiatives in Italy

LUMSA University ([www.lumsa.it](http://www.lumsa.it)) carried out an innovative project in which a method of validation of previous learning, based on the analysis of a student’s biography, was successfully applied for two courses: Educators and Managers of the Third Sector.

### Graduating Experience, a pilot validation project in the Italian University System<sup>1</sup>

The four key ideas outlined in the University Reform of 1999 - autonomy, learning, flexibility and the credit system - were the central principles behind this pilot project, launched in 2001 at LUMSA university. The title, "Laureare l'esperienza" or "Graduating Experience" stressed the main goal of validation of prior learning, namely the recognition of formal and informal learning in order to obtain a university degree.

As a pilot project, the validation procedure was launched for only two degrees: Educators and Managers of the Third Sector. These are relatively “new” professions that are based on bottom-up practices; very often, workers acquire competences, skills and qualifications through a learning-by-doing process. For educators and for people working in the Third Sector, visibility of knowledge was indeed top priority. However, it was also felt that the university had an opportunity to switch to a new approach to teaching/learning and its social value: from a one-way, teacher-to-student process, to an interactive process in which the acquisition of a university degree is the result of a virtuous circle between academic learning, working experience,

<sup>1</sup> Corradi, C., Graduating Experience, A Practice of APEL in the Italian University System

practical skills and training. Through its involvement in another project, the university already had a number of networks among social enterprises and social workers. In the validation process, they acted as the main stakeholders for the design, feasibility, and effectiveness of courses.

Students wanting to enrol in an Italian university must have a five-year secondary school degree. For the Graduating Experience project, students were invited to follow three steps:

- 1) Prepare a detailed curriculum of former education, professional experience, vocational training or any type of formal or informal learning that he/she feels relevant. Students were urged to give a very detailed description of experience, and to supply certifications, if any.
- 2) Participate in an interview with the validation Committee set up at the School of Education, in which prior personal experience is assessed. The Committee would open a personal file and quantify it in ECTS. This is the “knowledge capital” by which knowledge is made visible and formally recognized for enrolment.
- 3) Prepare a “study plan” for the degree, which brings together the “knowledge capital” of the student and the list of disciplines and examinations required for that degree by the Ministry of Education. In this way, the “study plan” is a merging between informal and formal frames of reference. Every single “study plan” is approved by the Faculty Committee of the School.

Over the two years of the project, students enrolled in the procedure were mostly people over 30, with five or more years of working experience and a strong motivation for personal and professional improvement. A number of them already held a university degree which was non-specific for their field, but most of them had none. Some students had attended a university and passed examinations, and then dropped out without completing their degree; for others this was their first academic experience. Many were bound for mobility between different jobs or working places.

The ‘Spring Out’ project, which took place in the Rimini province, is funded through the ESF Equal Programme:

### Spring Out project

“Spring Out” is an Equal project promoted by Enaip foundation, in collaboration with the University of Bologna. It started in 2004 and will finish in 2007. The general aim of the project is to support and strengthen active policies to improve job opportunities at local level.

The target groups are individuals with mental health difficulties, who are willing to start a professional path towards overcoming their disability.

The programme proposes a set of measures aimed at developing new models for:

- An integrated network of social services in the Rimini Province territory.
- Information desks to provide the target groups with basic relevant information on service availability.
- Support services to entrepreneurship, based on the set up of mentoring services.
- Validation of prior learning processes, which allow individuals with specific disabilities to identify their professional strengths and work on individualised improvement process – with the support of a mentor.

Within the Spring Out project the ‘Service for students with special needs’ of the University of Bologna has

contributed to developing the tool for the validation process, called the “*bilancio di competenze*” (BdC). The BdC aims to value the cognitive and practical abilities of the individuals involved by using a specific methodology and toolset built on the special needs of people with psychiatric disabilities. The BdC methodology also provides individuals with the tools they may need in order to develop their own professional passions. In this respect, the BdC methodology empowers individuals and supports the strengthening of their personal and social autonomy.

The BdC process follows four steps:

Induction. This is the most important phase. Individuals are introduced to the project and to the BdC (approach, aims, tools, expected outcomes). The involved users are grouped; criteria for setting up these groups include individual preferences and availability (especially in terms of time schedule). Gender, age and type of disability are taken into account. After the person has registered, s/he is interviewed to gather the information required for the process.

Testing. In this phase, the participants are involved in individual interviews, for a rather long period (approximately 40 hours). The practitioner (psychologist, educator) guides the interviewee with the aim of eliciting his/her past experiences (in formal as well as in non formal and informal learning contexts), personal and professional strengths, expectations for the professional future. The BdC has been conceived as a flexible toolset, which can be tailored to the characteristics and needs of the individual users.

Feedback. This is the phase when the BdC outcomes are given back to the individual user. The practitioners who have been involved in the particular BdC process elaborate the feedback. On the basis of what emerged during the interview phase, they clearly outline the past experiences and the crossroads that the individual user has encountered, and delineate some hints for further personal development. These ‘hints’ are presented to the individual and discussed. The rationale here consists in empowering the user and in stimulating his/her own autonomy in decision making.

Monitoring and follow-up. The users who have started their own development process are not left alone. Practitioners from the different involved centres provide them with support and follow-up actions, such as periodic monitoring sessions.

The results of the project can be categorised according to the benefits to organisations, and those to individuals:

For the organisation, two important elements of innovation have been produced:

- The relationship between the involved services and the individual users has improved, reducing the bureaucratic distance which usually slows down these processes.
- The introduction of the BdC practice within the territory of the Rimini Province represents an opportunity to bring together the different competent agencies and to foster their collaboration. In this respect, the Spring Out project represents a relevant experience supporting inter-agency cooperation and dialogue, reducing bureaucracy.

For the target group:

- Better employment opportunities
- Better self-esteem and self-improvement
- Raising awareness about own personal potential
- Better design of individual vocational plans, in a lifelong learning perspective.

## 2.6.6 Benefits and Target Audiences

There are no official statistics regarding the population involved in validation processes but, according to a survey carried out by Isfol and the University of Rome, there is widespread awareness of the relevance of non formal and informal learning, especially among young people. Almost 72% of the young respondents (in the 18 - 33 age group) stated that they achieved a relevant part of their competences in a non formal or informal way and half of this population (36% of the whole sample) would access a validation service if it was available.

The most important target groups in Italy with a potential interest in validation are: the employed, the unemployed, young people searching for occupational security or the recognition of their voluntary experiences and immigrants.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.6.7 Barriers to Implementation

It is clear that there is strong support for the introduction of a comprehensive, national system for the validation of informal and non-formal learning in Italy. However, there are certain barriers to the implementation of such a system.

Firstly, there is a strong need for procedural and methodological frameworks which can be used to compare and 'accredit' the different experiences in the sphere of validation so far. In Italy, it is not yet clear what a validation procedure is, who is able or legitimate to offer this kind of service, or what kind of general requisites the procedures should have.

Secondly, the individual pilot projects which can be found across the country vary considerably – each region tends to adopt its own model and 'language' for the validation of competences and its own system for training, qualification and certification.

There is also a lack of public awareness of the developments concerning validation of informal and non-formal learning. Individuals are not well informed of political initiatives or training and learning opportunities which might be relevant to them.

Finally, there is a problem of lack of resources to fund the development of new initiatives in the area of validation of informal and non-formal learning.

<sup>1</sup> Refernet (2006) 08 - Accumulating, Transferring And Validating Learning. CEDEFOP.

## 3.0 Private Sector

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### 3.1 Social Partner Involvement

The Social Partners are actively involved in the discussion on the improvement of individual competences and the development of training opportunities. They have a fundamental role in the promotion of acknowledgement and acquired learning, through active participation in the debate and through the management of the system of education and training.<sup>1</sup>

One example of a project that social partners have jointly developed is a research project on competence needs. The objectives of the study were to identify companies' competence needs in 16 different sectors and to provide public authorities with accurate information on long-term labour market trends. Competences needed at company level were identified by means of a survey. More than 80 professional profiles were established, 70% of which are considered "critical" or hard to find on the labour market. The results of the study were intended to be taken into account by public authorities when setting up education and/or training programmes, in order to better match training offers with competence needs.<sup>2</sup>

A second example is the VAI (Valorising non-formal and informal learning in SMEs) project, funded through the EU Leonardo da Vinci programme.

#### VAI, Valorising non-formal and informal learning in SMEs<sup>3</sup>

The VAI partnership is led by EBLA, a bilateral body involving SME associations and Trade Unions<sup>4</sup>. The project, which commenced in 2006, aims to identify, develop, test and fine-tune a methodology and a set of tools (the 'VAI KIT'), suitable to recognise and give evidence of different and often non-recognised learning modalities existing within European SMEs, with special attention to non-formal and informal learning. The purpose of this is to create the best possible conditions for SME managers to support the creation of new learning opportunities – internal or external to companies – in a lifelong and lifewide learning perspective.

<sup>1</sup> OECD Project on Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning: Italy Country Background Report, Draft December 2006

<sup>2</sup> Social Dialogue on Education and Training, Annex, 2002. <http://www.etuc.org/a/1131>

<sup>3</sup> Information taken from a Leonardo VPL-2 Case Study Grid

<sup>4</sup> Other members are FEDERLAZIO and CAN (associations of SMEs and micro enterprises), FORMARE, ERFAP and SMILE (training agencies, belonging to SMEs associations and/or Trade Unions), EXA TEAM (an SME with expertise in designing and managing European funded projects), SEDA (a technological partner), CRIA (a Spanish consulting firm, with strong expertise in local development and enterprise creation), CEEFIA (a French training agency, with consolidated expertise in competencies development), IAGO (a UK-based consulting firm with expertise in local development and European funded project management) and CKP: an organisation in the Czech Republic active in local development and social enterprise creation.

and to valorise individual efforts in lifelong learning.

The VAI project responds to the need expressed by consultants, learning facilitators, SME managers and heads of companies to create tools and methodologies to support SMEs and workers to increase their knowledge base, also recognising the experiences and related competences developed in non formal (e.g. on the job) and informal learning contexts (e.g. leisure activities). Only in this way is it possible for individuals to enhance their continuous effort to be competitive in the knowledge-based economy and society. Furthermore, the VAI approach also provides new solutions which allow evidence to be given for all existing learning processes within SMEs.

The VAI approach addresses employees working in SMEs and micro enterprises, with the objective of valuing and recognising the competences that individuals acquire during work practice and other activities. For this reason, the project provides different tools and methodologies to assess informal learning. The assessment process is explained in a guide on how to describe individual learning pathways and acquired competences. A comprehensive list of criteria is provided and for individual learning recognition, there is an individual acquis chart, based on the European standard for CV.

The key outcome, called the 'Development Plan', affects both the individual and the company. In this process the role of the learning facilitator (FAI) is pivotal, representing the 'trait d'union' between the organisation and the employee. The FAI utilises different tools (belonging to the VAI Model) to support the identification, evaluation and valorisation of competences and abilities acquired through non formal and informal learning practices.

The VAI methodology considers three groups of competences: basic, relational and technical competences. The elements that are validated focus on the learning contexts/modalities concerning personal life and work/professional life. All kinds of knowledge, skills and experiences are valued through an original grid for the identification of informal/non formal learning practices that employees already implement within or outside the company. The "User Guide for the Assessment Tool" is available at: <http://www.progettovai.org>.

The VAI Model follows four steps:

#### **Information**

1. Inform and explain to the management and the employees that knowledge can occur through non formal and informal learning methods.
2. Explain the benefits generated by the implementation of non formal and informal learning methods.

#### **Identification**

1. Identify existing non formal and informal learning practices in the company.
2. Identify non formal and informal learning practices that could be implemented in the company.

#### **Evaluation**

1. Organise the results of the evaluation step.
2. Analyse the effective non formal and informal learning practices at an individual level and/or a global level.

#### **Valorisation**

1. Design the development plans for the company and the employees
2. Valorisation of the non formal and informal learning practices inside the company.
3. Valorisation of the competences and abilities acquired through non formal and informal learning practices.

Validation of prior learning allows recognition of the variety of competences that individuals/workers develop throughout their professional and social life. For SMEs and micro enterprises it is particularly important to identify workers' strengths and competences, regardless of the formal training and education paths they have attended.

## 3.2 Action at company level

For many years, training represented an "extra" offered by management to employees and collaborators, often used for the vocational updating and professional growth of the employees. In reality, it was considered more a cost than an investment. At present, while in-company training has by now become an almost routine practice, formalised in the National Collective Labour Agreements, new challenges and opportunities are presenting themselves for businesses, in terms of recognition of the competences acquired on the job, or in other non-institutional training situations.<sup>1</sup>

Today, lifelong learning and the quality of skills and competences are no longer seen as linked to only growth and competitiveness of the company and individuals, but are increasingly seen as essential strategic factors for a company. Many Italian large and medium companies have recently established programmes and invested resources in competence management and validation, often through specific information system and software (for instance SAP).

The relevance of learning in the workplace is also underlined in the laws (Laws 53 and 30/2003) regarding VET and Labour Market reform. In both of these laws apprenticeship contracts are considered as one of the possible pathways (the other being school and vocational training) to accomplish the "Right-Duty of Education and Training", established for young people under 18.

The multiplication of contract types (temporary jobs were introduced only in 1997 in Italy) and the increasing importance of flexibility in the labour market have rendered recognition of individual competences increasingly relevant - both from the point of view of companies and individuals. Company representatives have also expressed an increased demand for competence transparency in new recruits in order to optimise recruitment and access activities.

Unfortunately, there remains a gap between policy and practice, and assigning real value to learning in the workplace. In addition, for enterprises, new initiatives affecting methods of assessment, optimisation and management of human resources, also generate implications for labour contracts and negotiation and can produce negative effects. According to a research study carried on by the University of Rome "La Sapienza" Sociology Department (see Viteritti, 1999) one of the central problems for companies lies in procedures: who (institutions, enterprises, VET providers) assesses and recognises the skills acquired and how? In practice many companies use internal standards and parameters but several problems arise when such standards and parameters, which are

<sup>1</sup> Transfine Project, Italy Case Study

considered proprietary tools, have to be made visible and in some way "exportable". Because of this, a potential system of validation should ensure individuals that their skills are widely recognised without hindering company autonomy. A strong and negotiated public co-ordination is considered necessary to ensure the enlargement and diversification of "recognised learning contexts" without violating firms' HR management prerogatives.

The above research study underlines that investments in in-company training are generally increasing, although there has been a reduction in staff attending traditional learning, such as training courses, in favour of work-based learning (such as learning centres, social exchanges, rotation and integration of functions and skills). These methods are now becoming common for all levels of employees - until recently they were limited to employees at higher levels of management. Also, as shown by several "local network agreements", school/company co-operation is becoming increasingly widespread (Formez, 2004). Agreements, partnerships and projects for specific training and practice or study periods, involvement of companies in guidance, link- and service-desks, are diffused throughout the country, promoted by enterprises or by industrial and local associations.

In conclusion, despite the increased importance of on-the-job learning within companies, a broad and shared definition of validation practices has not yet been reached, that would match new types of learning to traditional VET paths.

The enterprise associations (such as the National Craft Confederation or SME associations) as well as single research institutes have been devoting efforts to translate important pilot experiences of analysis and identification of competences carried out in single corporate contexts into the wider industrial system. Pilot projects have been implemented at both national (Ruffino, 2001; ISVOR FIAT, 1999) and transnational level (i.e. through several different Adapt and Leonardo projects). The challenge is now to diffuse such best practices and capitalise what has been learned from them, promoting more extensive and homogeneous actions.

An example of a validation project which has been implemented in the private sector is the 'Investing in People' project, funded through the ESF Equal Programme:

#### Investing in People Equal Project<sup>1</sup>

'Investing in People' was a project funded under the second round of the Equal ESF programme. It was set up in response to a problem of unemployment in the Italian province of Macerata, as a result of the restructuring of private companies, particularly in the shoemaking industry.

The Investing in People project plan was to act on workers' adaptability by using their workplace as a

<sup>1</sup> Investing In People, Province of Macerata, Equal Round II

## Investing in People Equal Project<sup>1</sup>

'laboratory' where they could highlight and validate the competences they had through informal and non-formal learning. This plan was based on the Dutch validation system, or EVC (Erkenning Verwoven Competenties - Recognition of Acquired Skills). In order to transfer the learning from the Dutch experience of EVC, an important task was to adapt the system to the local circumstances in Macerata.

The main activity of the project was to try out the EVC methodology in the three partner companies within the project. Beneficiaries were chosen within each company from the specific target groups (workers over 45, or disabled) and underwent the three initial stages of the validation procedure: assessment, portfolio completion and drafting of a Personal Development Plan (PDP). Following this, the beneficiaries were given tailor-made training, based on the PDP and finally, their competences were validated by the company.

The Equal programme includes within each project specific funding for 'dissemination and mainstreaming' activities. Thus, the pilot project is now being tested and validated. At the same time, mainstreaming activities are being carried out towards other provinces, regional and national authorities in order to seek support for the creation of conditions to enable the project to be viable in the long term (e.g. wider recognition of the method used, involvement of different actors).

## 4.0 Third Sector

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In Italy, training provided by the third sector, especially by Catholic associations, is quite prevalent and valued. The revision of the V Chapter of the Italian Republic Constitution in 2001 (concerning State/Regions governance general principles) formally recognised the role of the third sector in developing activities of general interest on the basis of the subsidiarity principle. Despite this, sufficient institutional recognition and validation of the associations themselves does not exist, nor of the competences that participants may acquire through activities with them (Florenzano, 2004).

The types of experiences recognised in the third sector are acquired through the following channels:

**Civil Service:** the national regulation (law n. 64/2001, “Establishment of the National Social Service”) states that competences acquired through the Social Service can be recognised as credits towards vocational training pathways or valuable access requirements to regulated professions. Universities can also recognise such competences as credits. The above regulation allowed the take-up of “agreement protocols” between associations engaged in civil service projects (namely ARCI, FIVOL, Opera Don Bosco) and universities or training agencies, although they did not generate common guidelines assuring validation process and results standards.

The increasing ‘professionalisation’ of charitable organisations, which are more and more involved in institutional services (e.g emergency services, support to people with disabilities, care of elderly people, etc.) causes volunteers to be specifically qualified and skilled.

This is why charitable organisations, especially those with a more consolidated structure and penetration in society, have taken on the role of training providers. An example is the first aid courses organised by the Italian society of the Red Cross. The attendance certificate can result in additional credits for jobs in the health service.<sup>1</sup>

**Voluntary Associations (“volontariato”):** associations operating in the voluntary sector have been very active in claiming their central role in promoting and valuing informal learning and individual cultural development. In recent years a co-ordination Forum (Third Sector Forum) has been established representing all Voluntary Associations ([www.forumterzosettore.it](http://www.forumterzosettore.it)). In 2000 the Forum signed an Agreement with the Ministry of Education stating “*the possibility of a certification of training credits acquired through*

<sup>1</sup> VPL, WP3: National Review, Italy. Available at: [http://www.vpl4.eu/national/download\\_view.php?id=78](http://www.vpl4.eu/national/download_view.php?id=78)

*association activities, with a specific attention to the definition of competences acquired by young people (also in distance learning), in voluntary activities, in social and cultural enterprises and associations”*. More recently (2004) the Forum signed an Agreement with the CRUI (Italian University Rectors Conference) in order to improve cultural and operational relationships between the voluntary sector and Universities.

**Cultural or political activities within Youth Associations:** youth associations joined together in 2003 to create the Youth Forum (<http://www.giovanidelleacli.org/forumdeigiovani.htm>) which includes over 40 different associations sharing common leading themes and demands. One of the goals is the establishment of a framework system allowing the visibility of experiences and learning acquired through participation in youth associations' activities. This framework aims to increase mutual trust between formal VET institutions and youth associations, allowing the development of specific devices for simple (or even automatic) recognition of learning. Some youth associations have experiences in recognition of learning through study visits in foreign countries, which have been validated as university credits on a local basis.

The Third Sector has an important role in developing projects that prevent social and occupational exclusion, for instance, through support to disadvantaged groups in identifying and validating their individual competences (something close to the French “*bilan des competences*”). Isfol carried out a specific research study of these experiences in 2000 (cfr. Isfol, National Employment Program Agency, 2000)

An example of a third sector initiative is the trans-national project 'FAIR', funded by the EU Leonardo da Vinci programme, which started in 2004.

#### FAIR project

This project undertook an in-depth study to find out about non-formal and informal learning in the fair trade sector, aiming to recognise skills learnt outside formal learning, and to recognise the role of the third sector in the acquisition of professional competences, through voluntary and work activities. The FAIR project is mainly orientated towards institutions in charge of recognising competences. The aim is to grant/permit organisations to gain instruments and methodologies for validation, certification and transferability of learnt and acquired competences in non formal learning (in the work place, activities in civil society organisations, as well as in informal learning (activities linked to family and personal life).

## 5.0 Conclusions

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There has been little significant development in the Italian system of validation of informal or non-formal learning since the previous Inventory was published in 2005. All relevant stakeholders are agreed that a comprehensive national system should be established but that this depends first on the completion of a national framework of reference (National Qualifications Framework, NQF).

Nevertheless, there have been a number of initiatives which will inform the future implementation of a national validation system, across the public, private and third sectors. The official *Libretto Formative del Cittadino* is undergoing trials in regions across the country, private sector actors (both social partners and private firms) have initiated relevant projects in response to labour market needs and in the third sector, the development of validation methodologies is beginning to take place among a number of organisations, including voluntary, youth and civil service bodies. Many of these have been supported by European Funding, such as the Equal and Leonardo da Vinci programmes.

The challenges remains thus to formalise the validation system – to capitalise on the support from relevant stakeholders and collect good practice and lessons learned from the projects and experiences so far. There is a strong need for procedural and methodological frameworks which can be used to compare and 'accredit' the different experiences in the sphere of validation so far. Other barriers to success include the lack of public awareness of the developments concerning validation of informal and non-formal learning and the lack of resources to fund the development of new initiatives in the area of validation of informal and non-formal learning. These obstacles must all be overcome, in order for Italy to join countries such as France, Norway and the UK, where validation of informal and non-formal learning has become an integral and widespread part of their strategies for lifelong learning.