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

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## **1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN ITALY**

*By Elisabetta Perulli and Massimo Tommasini (ISFOL)*

### **1.1 Introduction**

A broad-ranging discussion aimed at promoting the adaptation and innovation of the Italian VET and qualification systems has been taking place since early Nineties, but an extensive reform in this field is not yet completed and finalised: national institutions are still proceeding in the attempt to design new rules for the national VET system and Labour Market inside the European framework.

Within such a general attempt, 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. All social and political stakeholders, irrespective of their institutional aims and background (Ministries, Regions, Trade Unions, Employers Representatives, VET system providers, Universities, Youth Association and voluntary sector), actually agree regarding the need of validation of non formal learning through formalized recognition pathways or certification procedures.

At the present, however, nothing comparable to the APL in UK or to VAE in France has been put in place in Italy, due to different factors. First of all, two historical-cultural factors must be taken into account: the relevant formal and legal value of educational qualifications obtained through formal education pathways and the traditional weakness of short-term and adult education and training. The combined results is that the economic and social value of VET, independently from formal qualification released, is not culturally perceived. Moreover the professional and occupational regulations are largely based on the legal status of formal qualification and on the juridical values of education or academic titles. Such a crucial role of formal recognition is reinforced by the low level of institutional trust at a national level, especially as far as VET providers and employers representative bodies are concerned.

Nevertheless, as a result of the mentioned political awareness about the basic principles underpinning the validation of non-formal learning, a relevant number of national agreements and regulations dealt with this topic (IFTS, Adult Education and Training, Certification of Competence), envisaging the opportunity of validation of non formal learning, although not concretely defining a *system* (assumed as a whole organizational and resources framework composed of standards – both in terms of procedures and qualification contents – bodies, tasks and funding).

As a consequence of this systemic weakness, the different experiences and practices of validation undertaken within the different contexts (private, third sectors) cannot be outspread and the results cannot be fully recognised. Furthermore, such results are not comparable, since the purposes themselves, and the underlying principles driving each specific experience, are quite different in relation to different context and demands. For instance in some cases the validation activities can be carried out for firms purposes, in other cases for educational institutions purposes or as a support to young or adult job-seekers. At any rate, in this report

the general situation is shortly presented underlining the most relevant points in the debate, the state of art concerning regulations and the bottlenecks that characterize the Italian approach in relation to the issue of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

## **1.2 Review of existing initiatives: Public Sector**

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

However, during the last ten years the most important role in the implementation and management of the VET system, has been increasingly transferred to Regions and autonomous Provinces. At present the Regions hold the whole responsibility both for VET and school system, within a general national framework designed through the recent Law n. 53/2003.

Moreover, in almost all sectors of reform, a negotiated process has been carried on, involving all the concerned actors: Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Education and University, Regions, Social Partners.

In such a complex governance frame, the issue of validation of non-formal learning has been institutionally dealt with in several ways and in different moments, but essentially through:

- formal agreements between Government and social partners. For instance the Employment Agreement between Government and Social Partners in September 1996 (which confirmed and upgraded the relevant results of previous negotiations; in particular the Agreement in July 1993), contains several strategic guidelines for reforming the VET system, identifying among its core points the establishment of: "*a certification system as a suitable instrument to assure an 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*".
- National laws of decrees. Recently the most important national laws have been the above mentioned Law 53/2003, reforming the VET system (school, vocational training and apprenticeship) and the Law 30/2003 reforming labor market rules (contracts, job placement services). The first one (Law 53/2003) confirms the importance of alternating school, training and work in the lifelong learning perspective and envisages the further creation of institutional devices and practices aimed to valorise individual experiences, irrespective of the learning context in which they have been developed. The latter, Law 30/2003, provide the establishment of the "Libretto Formativo del Cittadino" (Citizen Training Portfolio), a kind of individualised document assumed as a comprehensive official document whose aim is "*to register the competences acquired through training programs included in the apprenticeship and "first access" contracts, through continuous and professional training lifelong*".

- attended (...), and further, according to the EU guidelines about lifelong learning, the competences acquired non formally or informally and properly recognised and certified”.
- At present both these framework Laws are in a start up phase through the arrangement of regulatory Decrees.
  - Ministry Decrees. In May 2001 a Ministry of Labor Decree ruled the “*Certification of competences in vocational training system*”. Within the Decree the new competence certification system is meant as aimed to the transparency of training programs, to put in value individual experiences, to help the matching between job supply and demand in the labour market. Competences are defined as “...*structured cluster of knowledge and abilities , normally connected to specific job profiles, acquirable through vocational training programmes, work experiences and self-learning, which are valuable also as training “credits”*” This Decree envisages the building of a system of national standards for the competences certification and establishes three kinds of Certification devices: the Vocational Training Qualification Certification, the Vocational Training Competence Certification and the Accreditation of Competences Procedure acquired on the job or on self learning in order to allow the access to formal training paths or to get a specific degree. According to this Decree also the “Citizen Training Portfolio” should be established by each Region in order to document and register the different certification acquired by the individuals.
  - Regional laws and regulations. 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. But the availability of these services is not generalised and the Regional self-ruling approach is at present showing several limits and disadvantages mainly linked to its lack of generalisation. Therefore Regions have been presently trying to put in place coordination initiatives in order to establish common qualification and competences standards and learning certification procedures.

Thus, from the viewpoint of validation of non-formal learning, all the aforementioned ruling documents, due to different reasons, actually remain at the stage of concept frameworks.

As an exception, a particularly interesting case in the panorama of VET system in Italy regards the Higher Technical Education and Training (IFTS) pathways.

The *IFTS* system was created, according to its establishing law (Law 144/99) “*to qualify and broaden the training supply for young people and adults, both employed and not employed*”.

From such a viewpoint, *IFTS* pathways are characterised as open options for potentially very different users (both young people and adults, both employed and not employed), ‘anchored’ to changing needs of local markets and not to once for all identified training needs. Moreover *IFTS* pathways are promoted and managed at least by four different VET providers: a school, a University, a training agency and a company. 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.

This complex amount of provision has entailed the simultaneous start-up of two types of initiatives within the *IFTS* pathways:

- the attempt – recently concluded, albeit on an experimental basis – to define National Competence Standards (see Agreement between National Government and Regions, 19 November 2002);
- the accreditation of prior learning envisaged by these pathways.

Concerning the latter, the *IFTS* implementation regulation of 31 October 2001 states:

*“ART. 3 (procedures for accessing pathways)*

*1. Young people and adults generally enter the higher technical education and training pathways on the basis of an upper secondary education certificate. Access to the pathways is also permitted to those who do not hold the upper secondary education certificate, after accreditation of competences acquired in previous education, training and work pathways, after completing the 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.*

*2. For the purposes of access to the IFTS pathways, the accreditation of competences consists in the certification of the abilities acquired previously, also through work and life experiences, and the recognition of any training credits for the determination of the length of the individual pathway. The procedures for accreditation of competences are defined by means of the agreements stated in Art. 5, paragraph 3”.*

Following these principles a concrete device of validation of previous learning has been designed in *IFTS* and has been launched through specific guidelines attached to the regulation documents on August 1st 2002 (Agreement between Government and Regions). Such guidelines can be synthesized as follows:

- the validation is meant to facilitate the access to *IFTS* pathways or a transfer from a system 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;
- the planning of validation process must be articulated into three sequential steps:
- guidance/counseling, aimed at allowing the active involvement of individuals in self-analysis and in the identification of their own specific training needs;
- assessment, aimed at collecting evidences of prior learning in a systematic way and at checking the acquisition of specific competences. A specific dossier is setup for this purpose;
- certification/recognition, allowing the access (or crediting a bonus) to a specific training pathway.

According to the results of monitoring data and information, even if the outcomes concerning the above procedure are not yet available, it seems that the procedure has been applying in a good percentage of the IFTS courses with favorable effects on accessibility of training activities by employed and unemployed trainees. By now we are still waiting for the monitoring data related to the courses 2003/2004. Regarding the courses 2000/2002 we have the following data: in the 85,6 % of the courses an entry guidance/counseling service has been provided and in the 29% of these has been an accreditation of prior learning toward the course.

**Table 17.1 – Entry guidance/counseling (val. %)**

	<b>1999/2000</b>
Yes	85,6%
No	14,4%
n. of courses	243

**Table 17.2 – Effects of the guidance/counseling (val. %)**

	<b>1999/2000</b>
No effects on accreditation	58,0%
Accreditation of prior learning	29,0%
The results has been registered in the final certification document	23,0%
<b>Totale</b>	<b>100,0%</b>

Survey ISFOL-Codres 2002

Considering the average number of participant is 15 per course, we can deduce that more then 3500 users has been involved in the process, even if we do not have specific data nor on the number of beneficiaries neither on the relative amount of credit. The next survey carried on by Isfol on behalf of Ministry of Education will be more precise on these numbers. We must also take into account that the courses in 2003/2005 period has been increased of the 30% as well as the practices of accreditation are significantly diffused.

Concerning the University system, at the moment the Italian system is involved in a large-scale reform process which has been started three years ago (see Decreto n.509 del 3/11/1999). The validation of prior learning is envisaged by the reform, including the validation of this learning as ECTS credits, but there is neither a diffused practice of such a provision nor shared guidelines concerning procedures and results of the validation.

This does not mean that the issues of assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning value are ignored, but simply that 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.

At this regard it is to remark the interesting experiences of LUMSA University ([www.lumsa.it](http://www.lumsa.it)). This small private University carried on in 2002/2003 an innovative project (“Degree and experience”, see Corradi, 2003) in which a method of validation of previous learning, based on the analysis of the individual biography, was successfully applied within an academic course in “Social Sciences”.

### **1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private Sector**

Also in the enterprises sector the lifelong learning and the quality of competences are no longer meant only as accessories in assuring growth and competitiveness of both individuals and organisations, but increasingly as essential strategic factors. Many Italian large and medium companies, during the recent years started programmes and invested resources in competences management and validation, often through specific information system and software (like for instance SAP).

Also within the above mentioned institutional documents (Laws 53 and 30/2003) regarding the VET and Labour Market reform, the relevance of learning in the workplace is often underlined. For instance, in both laws the apprenticeship contracts are considered as one of the possible pathways (the other being school and vocational training) valid to accomplish the “Right -Duty of Education and Training” established for under- 18 young people. Moreover the multiplication of contracts types (for instance in Italy *temporary jobs* have been introduced only in 1997) and the rapid escalation of the importance of flexibility in the labour market caused the progressive relevance of recognition of individual competences, acquired through different work experiences, both from companies and individuals standpoints. Even companies representatives expressed an accrued demand of competences transparency of new-comers in organisations in order to optimise the recruitment and access activities (see *Transparency Leonardo Project*).

Unfortunately, like in the institutional context, an unbridgeable gap remains between sharing the principle and enforcing it in reality assigning real value to learning in the workplace. In addition to this element, we can observe that as far as enterprises are concerned, every action affecting the methods of assessment, optimisation and management of human resources, generates implications for labour contracts and negotiation and often produces negative effects.

According to a study research carried on by the University of Rome “La Sapienza” Sociology Department (see Viteritti, 1999) one of the central problems for enterprises lies in procedures: who assesses and recognises the skills acquired and how (institutions, enterprises, VET providers)? In practice many enterprises use internal standards and parameters but several problems arise when such standards and parameters, which are considered proprietary tools, have to be made visible and in some way “exportable”.

Given such a concern, a potential system of validation should ensure individuals that their skills are widely recognised without hindering enterprises autonomy. In this perspective a strong and negotiated public co-ordination is considered necessary to ensure the enlargement

and diversification of “recognised learning contexts” without violating firm’s HR management prerogatives.

The above research study underlines that investments in in-company training is generally increasing, but a reduction of courses and other school-type actions is observed in favour of work-based actions (through learning centres, social exchanges, rotation and integration of functions and skills) arranged so as to support both individual and organisation growth. While until recently such courses of action seemed limited to middle-high strata of the company population, they are now becoming common methods at all levels. Also, as shown by several “local network agreements”, the school/enterprise co-operation is becoming increasingly widespread (Formez, 2004). Agreements, partnerships and projects for specific training and practice or study periods, involvement of enterprises in guidance actions, link- and service-desks, are diffused throughout the country, promoted by enterprises or by industrial and local associations.

In conclusion, on one hand a shared awareness has been raising within the companies world that on-the-job learning is important, on the other hand a broad and shared definition of validation practices has not yet reached equating new types of learning to traditional VET paths.

The enterprises associations (such as National Craft Confederation or SMEs 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 trans-national 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.

#### ***1.4 Review of existing initiatives: The Third Sector***

In Italy the learning experiences carried on in the third sector, especially within Catholic associations, is quite widespread and socially valued. Moreover in 2001 the revision of the V Chapter of the Italian Republic Constitution (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. Nevertheless, according to present laws and regulations in this field there is no sufficient institutional recognition and validation either of the associations themselves or of the competences acquired through the activities carried on within them (Florenzano, 2004).

As stated in different web documents (see below) the types of experiences mainly recognised in this sectors are those 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. Also universities can recognise such competences as credits. The above regulation allowed the diffusion of “agreement protocols” between associations engaged in civil service projects (namely ARCI, FIVOL, Opera Don Bosco, see websites list) and universities or training agencies, although they did not generate common guidelines assuring validation process and results standards.

Voluntary Associations (“volontariato”): many different 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)). The Forum signed several agreement protocols which are in fact very interesting for formal VET institutions. In 2000 the Forum signed an Agreement with the Ministry of Education stating “*the possibility of a certification of training credits acquired through 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 the Universities.

Cultural or political activities within Youth Association. Youth associations joined together in 2003 creating the Youth Forum (<http://www.giovanidelleacli.org/forumdeigiovani.htm>) which includes over 40 different associations sharing common leading themes and demands. Among them one can underline the goal of the establishment of a framework system allowing the visibility of experiences and learning acquired through the participation to associations activities. This framework is aimed at increasing mutual trust between formal VET institutions and youth associations and allowing the development of specific devices for simple (or even automatic) recognition of learning. In particular some youth associations developed interesting experiences about recognition of learning through study visits in foreign countries and agreed the validation of this experiences as university credits on a local basis. It must be also remarked the role of Third Sector (no-profit) enterprises in the development of social supply projects aimed to support disadvantaged population in the identification and validation of their own individual competences in order to prevent social and occupational exclusion (something close to the French “bilan des competences”). Concerning such experiences Isfol in 2000 developed a specific research study (cfr. Isfol, National Employment Program Agency, 2000)

## **1.5 Conclusions**

Indeed, the issue of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Italy is relevant in the reform processes involving the whole education and qualification system. Institutional initiatives at this regard can be clustered within two main categories:

- proactive initiatives, aimed at focusing VET and HE systems and activities on competences, the latter being assumed as outcomes of formal, non formal and informal learning. These initiatives essentially entail both alternation between classroom and experiential activities (as envisaged in various ruling documents in particular concerning University reform, IFTS and training within apprenticeship contracts) and codification of training programmes according competences-based standards;
- compensatory initiatives, aimed at recognising work or life experiences within formal frameworks through the adoption of principles, rules, procedures and instruments related to the training credit system. Excellent examples – in many ways close to the French *VAE* and the English *APEL* – are those of already quoted *IFTS* pathways.

The bridging process between formal education and training and non formal and informal learning in different contexts is at present involving many different actors and stakeholders: social partners, companies, third sector association and enterprises.

In the very end it can be stated that there are several interesting practices in the above mentioned contexts, but they remain as local experiences not constituting a *real validation system*. This is mostly due to two elements:

1. the lack of national standards regarding qualifications and competences is a felt by the different stakeholders as a sort of “original sin” and maybe represents the main hindrance to the adoption of the emerging European perspective on formal and informal learning;
2. the lack of a procedural and methodological frameworks useful to compare and to accredit the different experiences developed so far. In Italy there is not yet a common concept about how the “Validation of non formal and informal learning” should be defined and what is the role of the institutions in order to offer or to legitimate this kind of service. From this point of view the Italian situation reflects many of the open issues raised at an European level in the process and Documents regarding the common principles for the validation of non formal and informal learning (May 2005).